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JUGGLING THE CONTRADICTIONS:
AN EXPLORATION OF WHITE COLLEGE STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING
OF MERITOCRACY AND RACIAL INEQUALITY

A Dissertation Presented

By

SHERI LYN SCHMIDT

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

May 2005

Social Justice Education

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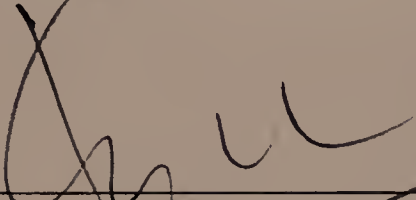
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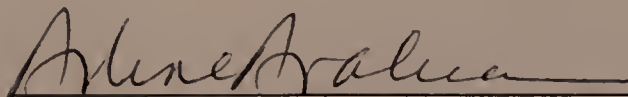
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Maurianne Adams, Member



Arlene Avakian, Member



Andrew Effrat, Dean
School of Education

DEDICATION

To my son Jason.
May my work make your life a little easier.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Completing this project required the support and participation of many faculty, friends, family members and colleagues. I have many people to thank. First, I would like to acknowledge my committee for their dedication to this study. A well-earned thank you to my chairperson Dr. Ximena Zúñiga. As a result of your hard work and persistence Ximena, I have completed a much more valuable study than I would have without you. The commitment you show your students is truly admirable. To Dr. Maurianne Adams, thank you for your support with this project as well as throughout my time in the Social Justice Education program. Your encouragement and guidance has been instrumental to my success. To Dr. Arlene Avakian, your insights have had a profound influence on the ultimate shape of this study. I am grateful you agreed to be a part of it.

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ABSTRACT

JUGGLING THE CONTRADICTIONS:

AN EXPLORATION OF WHITE COLLEGE STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF
MERITOCRACY AND RACIAL INEQUALITY

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This qualitative study investigates the ways in which White college students make sense of meritocracy in relation to racial inequality in the contemporary United States. Through in-depth individual interviews and qualitative methods of analysis, participants reveal their beliefs about how people achieve success in the U.S., their explanations of the economic disparity between Black and White Americans, and their perspectives on meritocracy in contemporary U.S. society.

Twenty traditionally-aged White undergraduate college students at a large public University in the Northeast took part in the study. The sample was stratified by gender, year in school and engagement with issues of racism. White students who had experience with issues of racism through academic courses, or who had taken active roles in student organizations that addressed racism were identified as “engaged.” White students who had not been actively involved in such courses or co-curricular activities were identified as “not-engaged.”

Based on their gender or year in school, there were no differences in White students' perspectives on either meritocracy or racial inequality. Prior engagement with racism, however, was strongly related to striking differences in White students' perspectives on meritocracy and their explanations for racial inequality. Engaged White students were much more likely than not-engaged White students to espouse a structuralist stratification perspective about both success and racial inequality, and to assert that the United States is *not* a meritocracy. Most of the not-engaged White students relied on individualist explanations for both the achievement of success and the causes of racial inequality. Of particular note is the way that many not-engaged White students seemed to be involved in a cognitive juggling act, trying to work with the contradictions between their ideology of meritocracy and their awareness of racial discrimination.

The findings raise implications about the role that merit and racial ideology play in forming White students' understanding of individual achievement and racial inequality in the United States. The study includes suggestions for new ways of conceptualizing anti-racism teaching to emphasize the role of meritocratic ideology and it suggests future research on developmental processes that may challenge traditionally-aged White undergraduate college students' reliance on merit ideology.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As a sophomore in college I wrote a paper for a sociology class about my family's social mobility. I titled the paper "From Harlem to La Jolla." I liked that title. I felt it was a good reflection of my father's impressive life's journey from the three-story tenement of his working class roots in New York City to our comfortable three-bedroom home in sunny Southern California.

I have always been very proud of my father. He has accomplished so much in his life and provided a valuable model for my own success. My father, Robert Schmidt, grew up in Harlem in what he describes as a cramped and drafty tenement. He could have spent his whole life there working as a butcher as did most of the men in his family. But instead, my father went to college and earned a bachelor's degree and then a master's degree in Social Work that launched his 42-year career with the YMCA. He retired at the top of his field, holding one of the most prestigious professional positions in the YMCA. Although working for the "Y" was not an exceptionally high-paying career, through it he was able to move his family to many parts of the world and provide his children with comfortable living standards and a good education. Now, he and my mother are enjoying a retirement of leisure and economic security.

For many years I looked at the mobility of my family as a clear example of the "American Dream." It seemed a classic "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" American journey. My father, the son of a working-class German immigrant, worked hard, got ahead, and brought his family into the middle class. I learned a strong lesson about

society from my father's success. Just as many other young White middle class Americans, I learned that if you work hard, you *can* succeed. The evidence was indisputable, I saw it in my own family.

I lived comfortably with this interpretation of my family's climb into the middle class until the day that interpretation fell completely apart. That was the day I learned that in fact my family's mobility was not solely a result of my father's hard work and motivation but was also due in large part to the G.I Bill, a federal mandate that is often considered to be the greatest affirmative action policy in U.S. history (Brodkin-Sacks, 1994) and one which disproportionately benefited White Americans over Americans of color (Onkst, 1998).

After his service in World War II, my father was able to attend college on the G.I. Bill. Although he had not planned to go to college, because the G.I. Bill paid for all of his tuition and provided a monthly living stipend, he took advantage of the opportunity. College was a transforming event for him. An important chain of events was set in motion because of his access to college through the G.I. Bill. Attending college gave him the qualifications to pursue his career, the ability to provide financially for his family and the ability to instill in his children the value of a college education, thus helping maintain our middle class status for generations to come.

Many of us who consider ourselves to be a part of the American middle class can look back into recent history to find the point where our families achieved this status. For most of us who are White that achievement was aided by an intervention of the federal government. The American myth of meritocracy overshadows those interventions and our history books point to "self-made men" without acknowledging the many programs

and services that have been set up to help people (primarily White males) help themselves¹ (Brodkin-Sacks, 1994; Loewen, 1995; Mantsios, 2001). Although I know that my father worked very hard and possesses strong character and intellect, I also know that meritocracy was not the only force behind his success.

Most White Americans and certainly most of the White college students that I meet in my classroom each semester, still believe that meritocracy is alive and well in the United States (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Brown et al., 2003; Loewen, 1995; Pharr, 1988; R. Smith, 1998). Smith (1998) asserts that more than students of color, White students are particularly likely to believe that all “Americans” are seen and treated as individuals and that *any* individual who works hard will be rewarded through a fair and just society. The experiences of many White students, particularly those who are upper or middle class, have taught them that society is basically fair. For many of them, there is no reason for them to believe otherwise (Sleeter, 1995).

Purpose and Significance

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the ways in which White college students understand meritocracy and economic racial inequality in the contemporary United States. This research is important because many of those who teach about racism at the college level agree that a belief in the United States as a meritocratic society is one among several key inhibitors to White students’ ability to understand the systemic nature of racism (Goodman, 2001; McIntosh, 1995; Nieto, 2000; R. Smith, 1998; Tatum, 1997). Although the literature is quite clear that a belief in meritocracy is thought to inhibit the

¹ Examples of these government programs include the Homestead Act, Federal Housing Act, and the G.I. Bill.

understanding of systemic racism, there is a need to further expand our knowledge about just how students view these two concepts in relation to one another. In other words, we need to investigate specifically how students' conceptions of racial inequality impact their beliefs about meritocracy as well as how their beliefs about meritocracy impact their understanding of racial inequality.

A meritocracy can be described as a social system in which rewards and status are distributed on the basis of an individual's own efforts and ability and not according to their racial, gender, religious, class or other group membership (Garcia, 2001; Hochschild, 1995; Lawson & Garrod, 2000; Sears, Hetts, Sidanius, & Bobo, 2000). Embedded in the principle of meritocracy is the understanding that although the individual must put forth the effort and demonstrate ability, the larger society must have structural mechanisms in place to reward them (Hochschild, 1995). Therefore, meritocracy requires a "tacit contract" between individuals and their larger society. People who teach college students about racism are often faced with students who truly believe in this "contract" and affirm that anyone who works hard can get ahead and that any racial policy that distinguishes race, such as affirmative action, is reverse discrimination (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; R. Smith, 1998; Tatum, 1997).

Indeed, it is not surprising that most White college students enter our classrooms holding an unchallenged, meritocratic and individualistic view of opportunity. As the dominant stratification belief in the United States, the principles of meritocracy are embedded in socialization and every institution of society (Hochschild, 1995; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; McNamee & Miller, 2004). Certainly the understanding of the U.S. as a meritocratic society in which rewards are distributed according to individual merit is

antithetical to the understanding of the U.S. as a society in which the systemic nature of racism skews the distribution of rewards along racial lines (Garcia, 2001; Pratto, Stallworth, & Conway-Lanz, 1998). In an ironic historical twist, the discrimination that has invalidated the American Dream for Americans of color has at the same time, created a situation which helps to validate it for White Americans. Racial discrimination has excluded entire categories of people from equal access to opportunity, reducing competition and leading Whites to mistakenly conclude that their success is based “exclusively on their own individual merit.” (McNamee & Miller, 2004, p. 17).

One of our goals as social justice educators is to help our students comprehend the complex and far-reaching nature of systemic racism. Our first task is to recognize that most of our students are viewing opportunity in the United States through a meritocratic lens. Next, we must seek to understand specifically how that lens impacts the ways our students will hear and interpret our lessons about racism. This knowledge can help us prepare more effective teaching materials and methods to move our students from a meritocratic view to an understanding of the ways in which groups have been cut out of the American Dream and the way those groups’ different positions are reproduced in contemporary social structures.

Through in-depth individual interviews I investigated how the students in this study (a) believe people achieve success in the U.S.; (b) how they explain the economic disparity between Black and White Americans; and, (c) their perspective of meritocracy in contemporary U.S. society. To develop a conceptual framework for the study, I reviewed three sets of literature: The historical construction of U.S. merit ideology; the

study of contemporary White racial attitudes; and, educational processes that challenge students' beliefs in merit ideology.

Dissertation Outline

The remaining chapters will be organized as follows. Chapter Two includes a review of the literature of the historical construction of U.S. merit ideology, contemporary White racial attitudes, and educational processes that challenge students' beliefs in merit ideology. Chapter Three introduces the methodology used for data collection and analysis. Chapter Four is a presentation of the findings related to how students understand the critical factors for achieving success in U.S. society, while Chapter Five addresses how they explain the causes of economic inequality between Black and White Americans. In Chapter Six, I provide a discussion of how the students coordinate their understanding of achieving success with their understanding of the phenomenon of racial inequality in the context of their beliefs about meritocracy. Finally, in Chapter Seven I report on conclusions and implications for teaching and future research that I have drawn from the study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of various literatures that illuminate the central issues raised in this study. The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the ways in which White college students understand meritocracy and economic racial inequality in the contemporary United States. I begin the chapter with an overview of meritocracy. This overview includes a definition of the concept of ideology in general and information about the characteristics and roots of American merit ideology in particular. It also includes a discussion of individualist and structuralist stratification beliefs. Next, since we know that stratification beliefs influence Whites' attitudes on racial policies (Hughes & Tuch, 2000; Kluegel & Bobo, 1993), this first section is followed by a discussion of the study of White attitudes about racial policies. This discussion will focus on four theoretical frameworks commonly used for interpreting the racial attitudes of White Americans. Finally, I focus on educational processes that can challenge beliefs in the dominant meritocratic ideology including factors conducive to increasing structuralist thinking and the relevant cognitive development literature relating to the development of complex thinking in the college classroom.

Merit Ideology

A meritocracy can be described as a social system in which rewards and status are distributed on the basis of an individual's own efforts and ability and not according to their racial, gender, religious, class or other group membership (Garcia, 2001;

Hochschild, 1995; Lawson & Garrod, 2000; Sears et al., 2000). Garcia (2001) concluded that there are five primary principles to the concept of meritocracy. They are: “1) people are responsible for their own successes and failures, 2) people can achieve upward social mobility, 3) everyone has equal opportunity for success, 4) individuals are rewarded for their effort and ability, and 5) people are rewarded independently of their categorical membership” (p. 2). Embedded in these principles is the understanding that although the individual must put forth the effort and demonstrate ability, the larger society will have structural mechanisms in place to reward those who work hard and have the skill to succeed (Hochschild, 1995). Therefore meritocracy requires a “tacit contract” between individuals and their larger society. The individuals take initiative, work hard, demonstrate ability and take responsibility for outcomes and in return the system provides equality of opportunity and distributes rewards according to merit regardless of individual group membership (Garcia, 2001; Sears et al., 2000).

Ideology

The term *ideologie* was originally coined by French philosopher Destutt de Tracy in 1796, to represent the “science of ideas” (Hall, 1996; Williams, 1977). Today, the concept is commonly used to refer to “the mental frameworks” (Hall, 1996) or “grids” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001) that different social groups and societies use to make sense of their world and the way it works (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Feagin, 2001; Ryan, 1971). Ideology can be seen as a “comprehensive set of related statements” (Huber & Form, 1973, p. 16) that help explain and justify what is “right and wrong, true or false, important or unimportant” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, p. 63).

To persist, an ideology must be “constantly recreated” in both the language and behaviors of members of society (Feagin, 2001; Fields, 1990). Barbara Fields (1990) explains the complicated nature of the concept by saying “it is not a material entity, a thing of any sort that you can hand down like an old garment, pass on like a germ, spread like a rumor, or impose like a code of dress or etiquette” (p. 110). It is not a set of “abstract beliefs” but is something that must be “constantly created and verified in social life” (Fields, 1990 p. 112). To illustrate, she uses the analogy of the everyday action of stopping at a red light. We all do this because of the obvious advantage to our personal safety. We also do it because it is a routine we have acquired because of the constant re-enactment of the behavior. She states that it is this ritual repetition of socially reinforced behavior that leads to the maintenance of ideology. Ideology is so embedded, that we will continue to stop at that red light even in the middle of the night when no one else is present.

Although an ideology does not provide group members with a specific “map” of what to say and how to behave, it serves as a sort of “practical toolkit” that includes “ideas and concepts, expression, prejudices, and stories” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, p. 63) that help individuals make sense of their day-to-day reality. In fact individuals may not know about or accept all aspects of an ideology for it to have an impact on their beliefs and behaviors (Feagin, 2001).

Dominant Ideology

Ideologies emerge at a discernable point in history for a specific social purpose (Fields, 1990; Williams, 1977). They are instrumental to the rationalization of systems of domination and inequality. For systems of inequality to be maintained, those with power

must convince those without power of the legitimacy and “fairness” of the inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Feagin, 2001; Huber & Form, 1973; Kluegel & Bobo, 1993; Ryan, 1971). Therefore it can be said that “ideologies are ultimately based on persuasion as a form of social power” (McNamee & Miller, 2004, p. 3). Bell (1997) uses the concept of *hegemony* to explain how persuasion as social power can be “something that is circulated within a web of relationships” not just “imposed from the top down” (p. 11). In this way power is not simply a function of a person or group’s ability to unilaterally impose its will. Instead, it is “an ongoing system that is mediated by well-intentioned people acting as agents of oppression, usually unconsciously, by simply going about their daily lives” (p. 11).

A salient characteristic of an ideology is that it does not have to be objectively “true” to be persuasive. As McNamee (2004) states “An ideal ideology is one that *cannot* be proven to be true or false... As long as the people *believe* an ideology to be “true,” then it is “true” for them in its consequences. People do not act in the world as it is but as they perceive and make sense of it” (p. 3). An ideology is effective then when there is no need to defend it because people perceive society as working the way that it should (Huber & Form, 1973; Ryan, 1971).

Ideologies that have been created and maintained to legitimize social inequality can be recognized as “dominant stratification ideology” (Huber & Form, 1973). In industrial societies such as the United States, the dominant stratification ideology is that of meritocracy (Huber & Form, 1973; McNamee & Miller, 2004). It is widely understood that meritocracy is deeply entrenched in the United States as the dominant stratification

ideology (Chesler, Peet, & Sevig, 2003; Hochschild, 1995; Hughes & Tuch, 2000; Kinder & Mendelberg, 2000; Pratto et al., 1998; Sidanius, Singh, Hetts, & Federico, 2000).

Characteristics and Roots of American Merit Ideology

American meritocracy is based on the premise that equal education and employment opportunities are available to all (Huber & Form, 1973; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). As a result, where an individual ends up in terms of economic rewards is directly related to the “effort one puts into acquiring and applying the necessary skills and attitudes and upon the native talent with which one begins” (Kluegel & Smith, 1986, p. 5). Therefore, unequal rewards are believed to be the result of unequal effort and ability of individuals. Because the acquisition of rewards depends on how hard an individual works, the system is seen as fair to everyone (Huber & Form, 1973; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; McNamee & Miller, 2004).

The ideology of meritocracy is part of the fabric of this country and is firmly rooted in the historical mythology of the United States as a *nation of immigrants*. The principle of meritocracy is closely connected to one of the most sacred ideals of this nation, the “American Dream” (McNamee & Miller, 2004). In a sense, meritocracy is understood to be the fulfillment of the promise of that Dream. Popularized by historian James Truslow Adams in his 1931 best-selling book, the *Epic of America*, (as cited in McNamee & Miller, 2004) the term “American Dream” has come to symbolize America as the land of opportunity for everyone. America is imagined to be a place where anyone who works hard and is talented enough can overcome any obstacle and achieve success no matter where they start out in life (Hochschild, 1995; McNamee & Miller, 2004). American society is thought to stand apart from European societies that were historically

dominated by “hereditary aristocracies.” It is a “New World” where people were instead able to transcend class boundaries and achieve on their own merits (McNamee & Miller, 2004 p. 2). This myth of the U.S. as a “land of immigrants” denies, of course, the genocidal displacement of Native Americans and ignores the increasing prosperity of the country as a whole based on the cotton industry produced by the slave labor of people of African descent. This idyllic vision of the land of opportunity - a place that welcomed the throngs of European immigrants searching for a new life in the promise of meritocracy - serves as a sort of “disguise” or a “cover story” for an American society that has always been infused with a restrictive racial hierarchy. Any discussion of American meritocracy then must take into account that this cover story has been developed over generations to deny, obscure and mask social inequality.

Jennifer Hochschild (1995) believes the American Dream can be summarized into four primary tenets of belief. The first three are similar to the principles of meritocracy outlined earlier. They assume that the American Dream: (1) is available to everyone regardless of their origin and station, (2) includes the reasonable anticipation of success, and (3) is achieved through actions under ones’ own control. The last tenet (4) focuses on the additional element of the relationship of success and virtue. Hochschild believes that virtue takes on four specific meanings in relation to success: “Virtue leads to success, success makes a person virtuous, success indicates virtue, or apparent success is not real success unless one is also virtuous” (p. 69). The inclusion of the concept of virtue is critical to fully understanding the impact of belief in the American Dream. As Hochschild points out, “if success implies virtue, failure implies sin” (p. 74). Therefore those who are able to achieve the American Dream, “the winners,” are seen as “good” while those who

are not, “the losers,” are seen as “bad” (p. 69). Under the tenets of meritocracy, individuals are not held accountable for where they start out in life but they are held responsible for where they end up (Hochschild, 1995; Huber & Form, 1973; McNamee & Miller, 2004). Clearly, if you are meritorious, you will overcome the circumstance of low birth and succeed. This association with virtue leads to the blaming of those who do not achieve the Dream for their individual failure and helps to mask societal structures which may be the actual cause of failure (Huber & Form, 1973; Kluegel & Bobo, 1993; Ryan, 1971).

The American Dream and meritocracy have at their core an emphasis on the individual (Hochschild, 1995; McNamee & Miller, 2004). This individualistic emphasis is also firmly rooted in the history and development of this country. As is widely understood, much of dominant American ideology can be traced back to the cultural ideas laid down by the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASP's) who were among the founding settlers (Kinder & Mendelberg, 2000; McNamee & Miller, 2004; Sherman & Webb, 1989; Weber, 1958). In particular, the belief system of the Calvinistic tradition brought by the Puritans to New England became the “vanguard of American cultural values” (McNamee & Miller, 2004, p. 4). Incorporated with a strong sense of individualism, the Puritans emphasized “the twin ethics of diligence and asceticism” (McNamee & Miller, 2004, p. 5), emphasizing hard work and savings as a way to glorify God. Together these principles formed the foundation of “the Protestant ethic” (Weber, 1958) and became a central force in the development of an emerging White and Protestant national culture.

Although it has been reshaped to meet the needs of a changing society, the ethic has endured. Consumption increasingly came to be seen as a reward for hard work. People no longer worked hard solely for the glory of God but also for the self-advancement offered by the acquisition of material rewards and status. During an 1830's visit to the United States, Alexis de Tocqueville noted "an inordinate love of material gratification" among the Americans. He further explained "hardly anything but money remains to create strongly marked differences between them and to raise some of them above the common level" (Takaki, 1993, p. 80). Over time the *Protestant* ethic lost some of its explicit religious underpinnings and now survives in American culture simply as the "work ethic" (McNamee & Miller, 2004, p. 6).

There are numerous examples of how the work ethic was infused into White society and subsequently shaped American culture. To illustrate, I highlight two examples that appear often in the literature. One example focuses on education, the other on popular literature – both of which have been important vehicles for disseminating and reinforcing the importance of a work ethic ideology.

As early as 1790, school textbooks conveyed lessons about the virtues of hard work as the path to success (Elson, 1964; Kinder & Mendelberg, 2000; Sherman & Webb, 1989). These texts made clear that since America was the land of opportunity, anyone who remained poor did so as a result of their own lack of effort and hard work (Elson, 1964; Sherman & Webb, 1989). As an example, the following message from an 1855 children's reader is typical of the "lessons" students received,

Many complain of Providence when the fault is their own. If they would only labor and think, wealth and eminence would be their lot instead of poverty and disgrace. Remember that all the ignorance, degradation and misery in the world, is the result of indolence and vice. (Elson, 1964, p. 254).

Aspects of popular culture also promoted this message. For example, an abundance of nineteenth century popular literature focused on the quintessential “rags to riches” stories. Horatio Alger published over 120 books and hundreds of short stories which told everyone that no matter how poor or powerless the circumstances, if one worked hard and always tried to do the right thing, one would succeed (McNamee & Miller, 2004; Tebbel, 1963; Weiss, 1969). The heroes of Alger’s stories, White boys who were often orphaned and always poor, were also always brave, generous, kind and persevering. These qualities served as the “bootstraps” they needed to surmount extraordinary hardships, beat the odds and pull themselves to success (Tebbel, 1963). Alger’s books were best sellers and appeared in almost every home, school and church library. Though his books are rarely read today, his name has become a “national symbol” of the “spectacular success” which was possible for those who pursued it with determination (Weiss, 1969). The legacy of these lessons and many others lives on in the deeply embedded belief in the ideology of meritocracy. Surveys show that most White Americans believe that it is possible to achieve success from humble beginnings (Hochschild, 1995; McNamee & Miller, 2004).

The widely apparent acceptance of meritocracy as a core aspect of American culture is at the heart of stratification beliefs in the United States. A society is said to be stratified when rewards are distributed in an unequal manner. Stratification beliefs serve as a way to explain the causes of the unequal distribution of rewards (Huber & Form, 1973). Since meritocratic beliefs place the responsibility for economic achievement on the effort and ability of the individual, any resulting inequality is viewed as equitable and fair (Huber & Form, 1973; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; McNamee & Miller, 2004). In the

next section, I present a social science framework that can be used to look at beliefs about economic stratification in general and the economic inequality between Black and White Americans in particular.

Stratification Beliefs

Social scientists cite two general perspectives for interpreting the causes and justification of social and economic inequality in society. These are labeled as an *individualist* viewpoint and a *structuralist* viewpoint. Dominant stratification ideology (meritocracy) promotes an individualist explanation for inequality. The primary alternative explanation is a structuralist viewpoint (Hughes & Tuch, 2000; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Sears et al., 2000).

This stratification framework has been used to explain the persistent economic inequality between Blacks and Whites in the United States. An individualistic explanation attributes Blacks' lack of economic success to Blacks' individual failures or a failed culture and asserts that Blacks could be as successful as Whites if they were only willing to work hard. The structuralist explanation on the other hand moves the blame off the individual and onto societal systems by attributing Blacks' lack of success to a historical and continuing system of inequality which has oppressed Blacks and over which Blacks have little or no control (Kluegel & Bobo, 1993; Lopez, Gurin, & Nagda, 1998; Sniderman, Tetlock, & Carmines, 1993). There are varying degrees within these seemingly polar explanations. For example, *strong structuralism* recognizes both the historical legacy of racism as well as the current institutionalized nature of the problem, while *weak structuralism* recognizes only past systemic inequality without an

understanding of continuing discrimination as the reason for current disparities (Kluegel & Bobo, 1993).

Although structuralist thinking can become more common in tough economic times (as during the Great Depression), it has never gained the prominence that individualism has within the American psyche (Hughes & Tuch, 2000). Because individualism appears to have ideological hegemony, it is believed to be internalized by both Whites and people of color in the U.S. (Hughes & Tuch, 2000; Hunt, 1996). Support for an individualist explanation for achievement is held consistently across all American social strata, with very little variation even in relationship to race or socioeconomic status (Kluegel & Smith, 1986).

Structural explanations on the other hand are fairly rare. They are believed to only be adopted by some people and tend to be more closely linked to an individuals' social group memberships such as race and socioeconomic status. Higher socioeconomic status, for example, tends to correspond with decreased structuralism among Whites (Huber & Form, 1973; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Blacks however tend to have a greater structuralist perspective regardless of their economic status (Huber & Form, 1973; Hunt, 1996; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Interestingly, Hunt (1997) argues that while African Americans and Latinos are more likely to hold a structuralist viewpoint, they also still hold tightly to an individualist ideology through acculturation to dominant American values. In his view, even those groups who historically have been cut out of the American Dream or have experienced exploitation and subordination still subscribe to merit ideology thereby demonstrating how thoroughly this ideology permeates all segments of society.

Hunt, (1996) feels that people of color are therefore more likely than Whites to have a “dual consciousness” that allows for the coexistence of both a structural and individual perspective simultaneously. This finding is in agreement with others who have found that the two perspectives should not be seen as opposites but as independently formulated worldviews which are correlated, and can co-exist (Hughes & Tuch, 2000; Kluegel & Bobo, 1993; Kluegel & Smith, 1986).

Although Hughes (2000) agrees that both perspectives can co-exist, he argues that this dual consciousness is just as prevalent among Whites as it is among people of color. Because both sorts of messages are components of socialization, it is not surprising that people believe both. It is also possible that in general, people recognize that human behavior is complex and that life’s conditions are produced by a multiplicity of causes, As others have noted (Hunt, 1996; Kluegel and Smith, 1986), structural beliefs about the causes of poverty seem to be “layered on to” (Hunt, 1996) an existing individual base (p. 188).

Kluegel and Smith (1989) talk of this *layering on* effect in terms of a “compartmentalization” of beliefs (p. 28). Compartmentalization is a reaction to a psychological need for “cognitive efficiency” (p. 28). Cognitive efficiency is a normal process that involves the human desire to consider “only a limited number of facts relevant to any judgment” so that an individual may “make decisions without an exhaustive search of memory” (p. 14). In this way, it is possible for structural beliefs to be “added to, rather than replace” the preexisting individualist ideology (p. 93) allowing individuals to maintain two sets of seemingly contradictory beliefs simultaneously.

An understanding of structural and individual attributions of inequality is critical to this study. While subscribing to both sets of beliefs is possible, clearly the majority of White Americans hold primarily to an individualist ideology. This reliance on an individualist explanation for achievement influences their attitudes on race and racial policies (Bobocel, Hing, Davey, Stanly, & Zanna, 1998; Garcia, 2001; Hochschild, 1995; Kinder & Mendelberg, 2000; Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1996; Sidanius et al., 2000). For example, we know that individuals who hold structuralist stratification beliefs are more likely to support race-targeted policies such as affirmative action (Hughes & Tuch, 2000; Kluegel & Bobo, 1993; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). To help illuminate the link between stratification beliefs and beliefs about racial policies, the next section presents an overview of the general trends of Whites' racial attitudes as well as the major theoretical frameworks used to interpret those attitudes.

The Study of White Racial Attitudes

The study of racial attitudes is one of the longest running topics in the social sciences. Since the mid-1940's, more U.S. surveys have included questions about racial attitudes than any other subject and have generated more data on this than on any other non-commercial topic (W. Smith, 1997).

The tremendous amount of survey data has led researchers to some general agreements about the major trends in White's racial attitudes. For example, there is agreement that blatant outward expressions of racial stereotypes and hostility by White people (a form of racism often referred to as "old fashioned racism") has been in sharp decline over the past 40 years (Bobo, Kluegel, & Smith, 1997; Chesler et al., 2003; Nosworthy, Lea, & Lindsay, 1995; Sears et al., 2000). Similarly, survey data shows that

most White people say they no longer subscribe to a belief in the biological inferiority of people of color (Bobo et al., 1997; Feagin, 2001; Kinder & Mendelberg, 2000; Kluegel & Bobo, 1993; Sears et al., 2000). Instead, as I will show in what follows, most White people hold a more complex, nuanced or covert ideology of White superiority.

The survey data also tells us that Whites are twice as likely as Blacks to believe that conditions for Blacks have improved and that racial discrimination is no longer prevalent (Bush, 2004; Mitchell, 2000; Sears et al., 2000). For example, in the 1996 General Social Survey (GSS) 66 percent of Whites and 34 percent of Blacks said that racial differences in income, housing and jobs, was not “mainly due to discrimination” (Feagin, 2001; Sears et al., 2000). More specifically, in the 1997 Gallup Poll, 86 percent of White respondents said that Blacks have “the same chance to get any housing they can afford;” 81 percent said that Blacks have as good a chance as White’s of getting a job in their local market; and 79 percent believed that within their town, “Black children have as good a chance as White children to get a good education” (Sears et al., 2000, p.12).

Finally, survey data is clear that the majority of White Americans state their support for the general principles of racial equality (Bobo et al., 1997; Brown et al., 2003; Mitchell, 2000; Nosworthy et al., 1995; Sears et al., 2000). Interestingly, however, although Whites claim to support the principles of equality, they are not necessarily in support of governmental interventions designed to promote and enforce such equality (Bobo et al., 1997; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Brown et al., 2003; Feagin, Vera, & Batur, 2001; Kluegel & Bobo, 1993; Nosworthy et al., 1995; Sears et al., 2000; Sidanius et al., 2000; Sniderman et al., 1993). For example in 1995, while 96 percent of White respondents agreed that, “White and Black students should go to the same schools,” only

38 percent felt that the government should “see to it that White and Black children go to the same schools.” Likewise, in 1972, 97 percent of Whites agreed that Blacks should “have as good a chance as Whites at any kind of job” but only 49 percent thought that the government should “see that Black people get fair treatment in jobs.” That percentage actually dropped to 44 percent by 1996 (Bobo et al., 1997; Sears et al., 2000). So while Whites tend to support the *concept* of equality, the majority of Whites do not support federal interventions that are designed to create such equality. To summarize this point, Sears et al., (2000) writes:

In short, one goal of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s was to outlaw formal segregation and discrimination. That goal is now virtually unanimously accepted. ... However, the use of governmental action to achieve that goal is at best sharply contested and in some cases strongly opposed by the White majority. There is little evidence of any liberalizing changes over time about such policies, and there are no systemic demographic differences that would suggest that compositional changes in the White population will inevitably lead to greater liberalization (p. 15).

This trend shows up clearly in research about attitudes concerning workplace affirmative action policies (Chesler et al., 2003; Feagin, 2001; Mitchell, 2000; Nosworthy et al., 1995; Tuch & Martin, 1997). There is general consensus that Blacks are far more supportive of such policies than Whites (Hughes, 1997; Hughes & Tuch, 2000; Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Sears, vanLaar, Carrillo, & Kosterman, 1997).

Theoretical Frameworks for Interpreting White Attitudes

While there is strong agreement about the direction of the trends in White racial attitudes, there is a continuing debate about the *rationale* behind Whites’ lack of support

for race-targeted policies² such as affirmative action (Bobocel et al., 1998; Hughes & Tuch, 2000; Kinder & Mendelberg, 2000; Sears et al., 2000; W. Smith, 1997). For example, those who subscribe to the theories of “symbolic” or “modern” racism argue that the lack of support stems from racial prejudice and anti-Black affect (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1998; Hughes, 1997; Kinder & Mendelberg, 2000; McConahay, 1986; Sears, 1988). Others who subscribe to “social dominance theory” or the “group position model” argue that Whites’ opposition to affirmative action is based simply on a desire to protect their own interests (Blumer, 1958; Bobo et al., 1997; Sidanius et al., 2000). Those who subscribe to “principled politics” or “principled conservatism,” argue that the lack of support stems from the belief that affirmative action programs break the rules that most Americans believe about fairness, equity and merit (Sniderman, Crosby, & Howell, 2000; Sniderman et al., 1993). And finally, others assert that a history of White supremacist ideology has resulted in widespread support for the ideal of “colorblindness,” a perspective that denies the existence of systemic racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Brown et al., 2003; Feagin, 2001). These varying viewpoints have populated the vast amount of writing about White perceptions of racial inequality. Interestingly, while most of the researchers analyze the same large sets of national survey data (e.g., General Social Survey, National Election Survey), they come to distinct and often contradictory conclusions.

In reviewing this literature, I became aware of the limitations of some of these theories in explaining the persistence of social inequality between White and Black

² Sears (2000) defines race-targeted policies as “policies specifically designed to redress social, economic, or political inequalities between whites and racial and ethnic minorities.” (p. 168).

Americans. While all of this literature helps us understand the many factors impinging upon the development of White racial bias, some of it falls short of providing a comprehensive framework for understanding the roots and maintenance of inequality. The exceptions to this are the perspectives asserted by those who propose the White supremacist theories (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Feagin, 2001; Lipsitz, 1998). These authors use a lens of White supremacist ideology through which to view the data on White racial attitudes, couching much of it as support of a colorblind philosophy. This approach not only addresses White racial attitudes but also addresses the ways racist ideology perpetuates racial inequality in the United States. Although I personally subscribe most closely to the theories these authors present, I feel it is important to also provide an overview of the other schools of thought. These traditional theories have been central to the interpretations of White racial attitudes, and have had a tremendous impact on the ways that White racial attitudes have been written about, spoken about, and taught for many years.

Sears et al., (2000) groups a collection of theories involved in this debate under three separate headings. The first group consists of the *sociopsychological models* (symbolic racism, racial resentment, etc). These models come from a long tradition of racial prejudice analysis, and share the assumption that racial prejudice and traditional social values are a part of the early life socialization of White people. The second group is the *social structural theories* (social dominance theory, group position model, etc.). These theories focus on group differences in economic resources, power, and status as well as the way ideology is used as a justification for protecting group interests. The third group is the *political theories* (principled politics, principled conservatism). This group of

theories grew out of skepticism about the role of racism in determining Whites' opposition to social policy. It asserts that Whites' opinions vary based on the specific nature of the policy and are based on *race-neutral* values and ideologies about fairness. I will use Sears' organizational strategy, outlining the three groupings he proposes and I will add one additional grouping I have titled *White supremacy theories*. This category focuses on the notion of *colorblind racism* (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) and includes what Feagin (2001) calls "sincere fictions" and Lipsitz (1998) labels the "possessive investment in whiteness." These theories focus on the ways in which merit ideology covers up White racial advantage and leads White people toward a belief that they are colorblind. In the following pages I present a brief outline of these major frameworks that seek to explain Whites' opposition to redistributive social policies such as affirmative action.

Sociopsychological Theories

There are quite a large number of theories that fall under the sociopsychological heading. Sears (2000) includes the following; "symbolic racism," "modern racism" "racial resentment," "subtle racism," "aversive racism," "ambivalent racism," "covert racism" and "the authoritarian personality." All these theories share the central idea that the formalized overt racial hostility of the past has been supplanted by a newer, more subtle, and therefore, some would argue, more insidious form of racism (Feagin & Feagin, 1996; Fox, 2001; Kinder & Sears, 1981; Sears et al., 2000).

In the literature about Whites' opposition to redistributive social policy, the most often cited of the sociopsychological theories is "symbolic" (Sears, 1988) or "modern"

(McConahay, 1986) racism. This type of racism steers clear of assertions of White biological superiority but at the same time maintains the moral and cultural superiority of Whites (Feagin & Feagin, 1996; Fox, 2001; Stephan & Stephan, 1996). The concept of symbolic racism was developed by Sears and Kinder (1970) to explain the political decisions of well-educated conservatives on topics such as busing, welfare and affirmative action. It is thought to arise from a combination of anti-Black feelings and traditional meritocratic values - particularly adherence to the values of self-reliance and hard work. It is believed that early in life, Whites internalize stereotypes about Blacks in which Blacks violate the values embodied in the Protestant Ethic such as hard work, self reliance, obedience and discipline (Hughes, 1997; Sears, 1988; Sears et al., 2000). It involves Whites resentment for Blacks “pushing too hard,” and “moving too fast” as well as resentment about “special treatment” Blacks are perceived to receive through government programs designed to improve their economic standing (Sears, 1988).

Such feelings of resentment are a central component of symbolic racism, so central in fact that some theorists have come to use the term “racial resentment” as a synonym for symbolic racism (Hughes, 1997; Hughes & Tuch, 2000; Kinder & Mendelberg, 2000). It is this focus on resentment and antagonism which sets symbolic racism apart from what Sears calls the “social structural theories” of prejudice which place a greater emphasis on Whites’ perceptions of Blacks as a threat to their privileged group interest within the social hierarchy (Blumer, 1958; Bobo et al., 1997). Hughes’ (1997) interpretation and analysis however suggests the possibility that symbolic racism may itself actually be a reflection of group interest. Specifically he states,

If hard work and self reliance are symbols that Whites use to define their status position and if Whites believe that Blacks can attain a similar status, that is, get

special favors and benefits that they do not deserve, then Whites may believe that their status has been devalued and express this sense of fear of devaluation as symbolic racism (p. 74).

Hughes (1997) also finds that both symbolic racism and group self-interest have independent yet significant influences on Whites' opposition to affirmative action. Although he finds that both have an influence, Hughes (1997) and others (Kinder & Mendelberg, 2000; McConahay, 1986; Nosworthy et al., 1995) do contend that symbolic racism is in fact the *most* critical predictor of Whites' opposition to affirmative action. This claim is contested by supporters of social structural or political theories who believe that anti-Black affect is no longer a factor in Whites' racial policy opinions (Sidanius et al., 2000; Sniderman et al., 2000; Sniderman et al., 1993).

Social Structural Theories

According to Sears (2000) the social structural theories most involved in debate over White racial attitudes are the "sense of group position model" and "social dominance theory." In addition to a focus on social structures, these theories also share the assumptions that all people identify with their own racial or ethnic group and that such identification creates conflicts between group self-interests. In addition, dominant groups perpetuate an ideology that legitimizes their dominant position. Therefore, opposition to race-based social policies is seen as a mechanism for Whites to protect their own interests (Sears et al., 2000).

Sense of Group Position Model

This model is based on Herbert Blumer's (1958) work that purports, "Race prejudice exists basically in a sense of group position rather than in a set of feelings

which members of one racial group have towards the members of another racial group” (p. 3). The real object of White racial attitudes then is thought to be “beliefs about the proper relations between groups” (Bobo et al., 1997p. 38). According to Sears (2000 p. 24), the basic tenets of this model state:

1. People differentiate themselves from others through the use of group categories, accompanied by a belief in in-group superiority.
2. In-group members view members of out-groups as alien and different.
3. Members of dominant groups believe that such membership confers legitimate proprietary rights to superior status, power, and other resources.
4. Dominant group members perceive threats from members of lower-status groups who desire a greater share of those resources.

Blumer (1958) sees prejudice as a “defensive reaction” and a “protective device” that functions to preserve Whites’ dominant position in society (p. 5). The more recent work of Bobo et al. (1997) elaborates on Blumer’s sense of group position model through the development of the theory of “laissez-faire racism.” Bobo et al. (1997) put the development of “new racism” in a historical context by claiming that changes in U.S. political and economic life - specifically the shift from the labor-intensive agriculture of the Jim Crow South to a national economy based on free market capitalism - caused a shift in the socially constructed sense of group position (Bobo et al., 1997; Sears et al., 2000). Bobo et al. (1997) argue that this new form of racism emerged to defend Whites’ continued dominant position within the new economic structure. They believe it is a combination of the feelings of “entitlement”

and “threat” that join forces to shape Whites racist attitudes as an explanation of Whites’ privileged and Blacks’ subordinated position. As a result, laissez-faire racism

...takes as legitimate extant patterns of Black-White socioeconomic inequality and residential segregation, viewing these conditions, as it does, not as the deliberate products of racial discrimination, but as outcomes of a free-market, race-neutral state apparatus and the freely taken actions of African Americans themselves (Bobo et al., 1997 p. 38).

A major component of laissez-faire racism is placing responsibility for Blacks lack of socioeconomic success on Blacks themselves (Bobo et al., 1997; Sears et al., 2000). The focus is no longer a belief in an inherent biological inferiority of Blacks but instead on allegations of cultural inferiority of Blacks as evidenced through “their cultural resistance to the work ethic” (Sears et al., 2000, p. 25).

Social Dominance Theory

According to Sidanius et.al. (2000) there are three core assumptions of the social dominance theory. Those assumptions are:

1. Societies are organized around a hierarchy in which a dominant group receives a disproportionate share of “positive value” (e.g. power, wealth and education) while at least one subordinate group experiences a disproportional share of “negative value” (e.g. low-status jobs, poor health);
2. politics is based on competition over limited resources; and,
3. the primary function of social values and ideologies is to rationalize the relatively privileged status of the dominant group and to maintain the group-based hierarchy.

Social dominance (SD) theorists believe that psychological justification for inequality, referred to as “hierarchy legitimizing myths,” have been socially constructed

and are deeply embedded in U.S. society (Garcia, 2001; Pratto et al., 1998; Sears et al., 2000). It is because of the embedded nature of these myths in fact, that SD theorists disagree with *principled politics* theorists who claim that all Americans are committed to equality and that White opposition to affirmative action is based on its violation of fairness. Instead SD theories claim that it is a commitment to anti-egalitarianism that drives Whites' resistance to redistributive social policies (Sidanius et al., 2000). The authors cite as an example the 1990's decision of the Board of Regents of the University of California to abolish affirmative action. In that decision, the "vigilant protection of fairness and equality" made affirmative action for Blacks unacceptable and left affirmative action for the children of politicians, alumni and large contributors intact (Sidanius et al., 2000). This decision reflects the tendency to favor the powerful over the powerless as well as the motivation for powerful dominants to support social policy which maintains that dominant position (Pratto et al., 1998; Sidanius et al., 1996; Sidanius et al., 2000). While the social dominance theorist would agree with the principled politics theorist that Whites oppose affirmative action policies because they are perceived as "unfair," the concept of unfairness is used in a very different way. It is not the fundamental principle of the unfairness of one group gaining an advantage over another group, but instead the specific point of Black people gaining an "unfair" advantage over White people and thus threatening the social dominance of Whites (Sidanius et al., 2000).

Political Theories

Under this heading are the closely related theories of "principled politics" and "principled conservatism." The basic premise of the political theories is that Whites'

opposition to race targeted programs is not about racism but instead reflects deeply held views about the proper role of government (Hughes & Tuch, 2000; Sears et al., 2000), as well as “principled considerations of fairness, equity, and the goal of establishing a truly color-blind society” (Sidanius et al., 1996, p. 478). In other words, the belief is that “the politics of race is about politics, not race” (Sidanius et al., 2000). Sniderman and colleagues (1993), strong supporters of the principled politics model, state that it is “simply wrong” to think that White racism is the primary factor driving contemporary arguments over Whites’ racial attitudes. Sniderman (2000) and other theorists who support this view (including Stephen and Abigail Thernstrom, Dinesh D'Souza, and Shelby Steele) believe that programs like affirmative action have only made race relations worse because they violate traditional American values. These individuals call for the development of colorblind policies that “appeal to moral principles reaching beyond race” (Sears et al., 2000, p. 29).

Sidanius et al, (2000, p. 195) summarize the following as the basic tenets of the Principled Politics theory:

1. Americans are strongly committed to the value of equality;
2. Opposition to policies such as affirmative action and quotas is grounded not in prejudice or racial animus, but in political and ideological values, such as individualism and fairness;
3. Conservatives are not more likely than liberals to practice a racial double standard in evaluating government-sponsored policies for different target groups;

4. Racism and political conservatism are essentially independent of one another, at least among the educated; and,
5. It is a respondent's education, not their ideological orientation that explains the differential support for policies targeted toward different groups.

As with the other theories, there is a great deal of disagreement over the validity of these claims. To begin with, as stated above, social dominance theorists disagree that Americans are committed to equality. Instead, they believe dominant group members have a desire to maintain their position of dominance within the hierarchical social structure (Sidanius et al., 2000). The social dominance theorists agree that racial animus is no longer a factor in Whites' opposition to race-targeted policies. However, in contrast to principled politics theorists, social dominance theorists believe that anti-Black affect never really was a major factor in racial oppression in the United States (Sidanius et al., 2000). Also, contrary to the claims of principled politics theorists, Bobocel (1998) found that people's level of prejudice was positively associated with opposition to affirmative action policies even when those policies were not perceived to be "justice-violating," and Sidanius and colleagues (1996) found racism and conservatism to be positively associated with one another.

White Supremacy Theories

This fourth group of theories is one not put forth by Sears (2000). It is the group of theorists that I feel most closely match my own understanding of racism and fits most appropriately with the goals of this study. These theories are the best fit because I am interested in how ideology impacts students' understanding of racial inequality. This group of theorists speaks directly to this issue by looking at how dominant ideology

masks structural inequality in United States society. In the following brief discussion I will provide an outline of the work of three theorists that I place together under the heading of White supremacy theories. I label them such because they each place an ideology of White supremacy at the center of the analysis of White racial attitudes. Although in common usage the term *White supremacy* represents the beliefs of radical White separatists groups, here it is used to stand for “a political, economic, and cultural system in which Whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources” (Mills, 2003).

As stated, theorists in this section draw heavily on the concept of ideology to explain White racial attitudes. As an example, Bonilla-Silva (2001) believes that the best way to understand individual racial views is through the notion of “racial ideology” which he defines as the “racially based frameworks used by actors to explain and justify (dominant race) or challenge (subordinate race or races) the racial status quo” (p. 63). He believes that these racial frameworks are “the social representations of the races, that is, the conscious and unconscious sum of ideas, prejudices, and myths that crystallize the victories and defeats of the races regarding how the world is and ought to be organized” (p. 64).

Bonilla-Silva (2001) also believes that the social circumstances of the post-Civil Rights era requires us to reexamine our conceptions of White racial ideology. Using the notion of “now you see it, now you don’t,” (Bonilla-Silva, 2003, p. 272) he argues that what was once clear and overt White supremacy prior to the Civil Rights Movement has since retreated undercover and now resides in a dangerous, covert racist ideology called

colorblind racism. He and others (Brown et al., 2003; Feagin et al., 2001) describe the following three beliefs as the basis of colorblind racism:

1. A belief that the Civil Rights Movement was successful at ending structural discrimination against Blacks. Although some racism does exist today, it is in the form of the individual prejudices and practices of a few individuals Whites.
2. An understanding that any current inequality between Black and White Americans can be explained as the result of Blacks' poor cultural values and community standards, or lack of individual effort by Blacks themselves.
3. Because racial discrimination is no longer institutionalized, the U.S. is becoming a colorblind society meaning that there is no longer a need for affirmative action or other race-conscious policies. Instead there is faith that a free market economy will embrace Dr. Martin Luther King's vision in which a person will be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

By articulating this set of beliefs – that is, denial of racial discrimination, culturally based explanations of racial inequality and faith in the fairness of a free market economy through support of meritocracy – Whites can appear 'not racist.' They can criticize government programs aimed at combating racial inequality and they can blame Blacks themselves for their situation as if they were "principled, even moral positions" (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, p. 80).

According to Feagin, (2001) as a result of this colorblind racial ideology, Whites develop *sincere fictions* about society. Sincere fictions are "personal ideological

constructions,” supported by a social fabric of White dominance that allows Whites to see themselves “as not racist and as good people even while they think and act in anti-Black ways” (p. 186). These views are said to be “sincere” because “the Whites who espouse them truly believe themselves to be colorblind people who do not discriminate” and “fictions” because they deny the realities of racial discrimination (Bell, 2002, p. 237). The fictions are both about the character, history, and circumstances of Whites themselves as well as about the character, history and circumstances of other groups.

Among the most potent and damaging of all fictions perpetuated by Whites is the belief that the United States provides equal opportunity for all racial groups. Feagin (2001) states that part of this fiction is as an “almost obsessive concern about the work ethic of Black Americans” (p. 203). He believes that the “gospel of the work ethic” (p. 204) is central to Whites’ self-conception and that Whites tend to present themselves “as virtuous and the Black poor as enduring justifiable punishment for being non-virtuous.” (Feagin et al., 2001, p. 204). Through this sincere fiction, Whites can enjoy their unearned privileges through self-justified belief in their own intrinsic virtue.

Lipsitz (1998) makes a similar argument regarding his concept of the *Possessive Investment in Whiteness*. He believes that Whites’ ignorance of historical and present day structural racism leads them to believe that any wealth they have acquired is the result of their own hard work and diligence. Though lengthy the following quote is included in its entirety because of its clear and comprehensive explanation of Lipsitz’ (1998) argument.

Because they are ignorant of even the recent history of the possessive investment in whiteness – generated by slavery and segregation, immigrant exclusion and Native American policy, conquest and colonialism, but augmented by liberal and conservative policies as well – Americans produce largely cultural explanations for structural social problems. The increased possessive investment in whiteness generated by the disinvestment in U.S. cities, factories, and schools since the

1970s disguises as racial problems the general social problems posed by deindustrialization, economic restructuring, and neoconservative attacks on the welfare state. It fuels a discourse that demonizes people of color for being victimized by these changes, while hiding the privileges of whiteness by attributing the economic advantage enjoyed by Whites to their family values, faith in fatherhood and foresight – rather than to the favoritism they enjoy through their possessive investment in whiteness (p. 18).

The concepts of sincere fictions and the possessive investment in Whiteness demonstrate how easily a colorblind philosophy promotes the dominant stratification ideology of meritocracy. It serves as a convincing mask for racial inequality, disguising structural racism in a cloak of “fairness” and “equality.”

Merit Ideology as a Common Thread

It is important to emphasize that the principles of meritocracy - that is, an inherent belief in the work ethic and the individualistic nature of the achievement of success - are a notable thread that runs through each of the theoretical frameworks described above. In the sociopsychological theories, anti-Black affect is linked to a belief that Blacks lack the ethics of hard work, self-reliance, obedience, and discipline (Hughes, 1997; Sears, 1988; Sears et al., 2000). Likewise, a major component of the social-structural theory of laissez-faire racism is the belief that Blacks are responsible for their own lack of success due to cultural inferiority particularly related to the work ethic (Bobo et al., 1997; Sears et al., 2000). The political theories claim that policies such as affirmative action violate the principles of meritocracy by giving preference to a group based on their social identity. Finally, White supremacy theories state that Whites develop personal ideological constructions about Whites as virtuous and Blacks as non-virtuous in relation to the work ethic (Feagin, 2001). For the purposes of this study it is important to recognize the major role that merit ideology plays in all of these theories and their interpretations of White

racial attitudes, a role that is often not specifically delineated in the teaching and discussion of these theories.

Processes that Challenge Students' Beliefs in Merit Ideology

The preceding sections have shown the pervasive hold of meritocracy not only among those Whites of different European ethnic groups who have or believe they have experienced meritocratic advancement but also among those groups, (African Americans, Latinos, etc.) who have not. As noted, even those within communities of color who recognize the structural barriers to their upward mobility express a belief in an individualistic reward system (Hughes & Tuch, 2000; Hunt, 1996).

One of the most often cited sources of the perpetuation of the dominant ideology is the process of socialization. The dominant ideology is promoted through all aspects of society including educational, religious and cultural institutions (Harro, 2000; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Lopez et al., 1998; McNamee & Miller, 2004). Socialization is indeed a powerful force and it is thought that "beliefs that are socialized early and consistently enough form a basic framework of knowledge that is difficult for an individual even to recognize, let alone overturn" (Kluegel & Smith, 1986 p. 19). In addition, factors such as the early stages of racial identity development (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997), self-interest (Huber & Form, 1973; Kluegel & Smith, 1986), and group identification (Huber & Form, 1973; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; McNamee & Miller, 2004) have been cited as sources that support the dominant ideology.

With all of these forces perpetuating the dominant ideology, it is not surprising that when we look at the efforts of White college students to understand the historical legacy and contemporary reproductions of racism that the overriding ideology of

meritocracy is present. Indeed, White college students have no particular reason to be aware of challenges to a meritocratic worldview (Goodman, 2001; Sleeter, 1995).

Therefore, social justice educators are presented with the task of helping White students, who hold to a largely unexamined meritocratic view of opportunity, come to see that such opportunity does not apply to all.

The remainder of this literature review will focus on college level anti-racism education as a source of challenge to the dominant ideology. It will include literature on the conditions needed to help students shift from individualist to structuralist stratification beliefs as well as cognitive development literature focusing on the development of complex thinking that is understood as a necessary but not sufficient condition for thinking structurally rather than individually.

Pat Gurin (1999) states that most college student thinking is “automatic” and based on “previously learned routines” (p. 38). As demonstrated in previous sections of this review, a meritocratic view of opportunity is a clear example of automatic thinking in the United States. Student thinking can become more complex when “a novel situation for which they have no script” is encountered by students (Gurin, 1999, p. 38). Through a variety of intellectual, emotional, and social experiences in college which cause contradiction, dissonance and disequilibrium for students, their thinking becomes more multifaceted, allowing them to make more complex judgments, critical evaluations of other’s claims of knowledge, and to defend their own perspective on controversial issues (King & Shuford, 1996).

Many aspects of college life present students with the “novel situations” which help challenge automatic thinking, including both the content of material presented in

classroom settings as well as interactions with peers through student organizations, residence halls, and study groups (Astin, 1993; Bliming, 2001; Gurin, 1999; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Pascarella, Palmer, Moye, & Pierson, 2001). A quality liberal arts college education exposes students to new and more complex ideas, and creates opportunities for active engagement with the curriculum, diverse peers, and other types of activities such as leadership development, service learning and intergroup dialogue (Gurin, 1999).

Research cites compelling evidence that interactions with diverse peers enhances both learning and civic outcomes (Gurin, 1999; Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado, 1999). For example, research shows that interaction with diverse peers in a racially diverse college environment is statistically associated with measured gains in critical thinking skills (Astin, 1993; Bliming, 2001; Gurin, 2003; Pascarella et al., 2001). And, as Pat Gurin (1999) argues, students educated in diverse settings show “greater engagement in active thinking processes, growth in intellectual engagement and motivation, and growth in intellectual and academic skills” (p. 45). Further, students educated in diverse college and university settings are more motivated and better prepared to become active participants in a pluralistic democracy (Gurin, 1999; Hurtado, 1999). Interaction with diverse peers has been shown to have a positive impact on students’ commitment to social justice goals (Hurtado, Laird, Landreman, Engberg, & Fernandez, 2002), their engagement in social action (Laird, Engberg, & Hurtado, in press; Nagda, Gurin, & Lopez, 2003; Zúñiga, Williams, & Berger, in press), and their willingness to become social justice allies (Broido, 2000). Specifically students who interact with diverse peers are better able to “understand and consider multiple perspectives, deal with the conflicts that different

perspectives sometimes create, and appreciate the common values and integrative forces that harness difference in pursuit of the common good” (Gurin, 1999 p. 46).

College courses that deal with racism and other social justice topics are also well suited for providing developmental opportunities for students. These courses require students to exercise many of the qualities that support the development of critical thinking skills (Adams & Zhou-McGovern, 1994; Bliming, 2001; Goodman, 2001; King & Shuford, 1996; Pascarella et al., 2001). Racial inequality is a complex, multileveled phenomenon. When White students learn about it they are often dealing with a great deal of new information, much of which contradicts what they have previously understood and leaves them personally implicated in ways they have not before experienced (Adams, 1997; Goodman, 2001; R. Smith, 1998; Tatum, 1994). It is a stated goal and explicit curricula design of many who teach about racism to provide students with the opportunity to experience direct contradictions to their previously held ideology (Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997; Goodman, 2001; Griffin & Bell, 1997; Sleeter, 1995). Even when it is not a stated goal of the instruction, the process of learning about the systemic nature of racism is imbued with contradiction (Goodman, 2001).

The specific topic of meritocracy when examined in the light of racial inequality presents many challenging contradictions for students. Indeed, the understanding of the U.S. as a meritocratic society in which rewards are distributed according to individual merit, is antithetical to the understanding of the U.S. as a society in which the systemic nature of racism skews the distribution of rewards along racial lines (Garcia, 2001; McNamee & Miller, 2004; Pratto et al., 1998).

There is an overwhelming consensus among those who teach about racism that only a structural analysis can account for the complex nature of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Brown et al., 2003; Feagin, 2001; Tatum, 1997; Young, 1990). Current-day scholars and educators have drawn upon a legacy of scholarship popularized in widely-used academic texts presenting a structural analysis of history to explain current social strata (Ignatiev, 1995; Kluegel & Bobo, 1993; Oliver & Shapiro, 1997; Roediger, 1991; Takaki, 1993; Zinn, 1995). And as a result, what occurs in the classroom is an analysis that is structural, coming up against an unexamined ideological commitment to meritocratic ideals. Scholars and educators are aware that this is a major problem in the classroom (Adams, 1997; Bell, 2002; Bidell, Lee, Bouchle, Ward, & Brass, 1994; Fritschner, 2001; Goodman, 2001; Griffin, 1997).

The shift from conceptualizing racism as an individual phenomenon to seeing it as structural in nature can be particularly challenging for students. To do this they need to concede that how they had previously thought about race and racism in this country is incomplete and inaccurate. They will need to greatly expand their understanding of the historical legacy and social structures of racism to grasp the distinction between behaviors that are directed at a specific individual in a specific situation to the broader and often not so obvious, systematic actions against people of color throughout time (Goodman, 2001).

The dilemma is how to work with students who come to these classes holding to an unchallenged, unexamined, meritocratic and individualistic view of opportunity in this country. How do we move students from this meritocratic view to an understanding of the history of the ways in which groups have been cut out of the American Dream and the

way those groups' different positions are reproduced in contemporary social structures? In other words, how do we move students from *automatic* thinking to *critical* thinking? And most specifically, how do we move students from *individualist* thinking to *structuralist* thinking?

Unfortunately there is a relatively small body of literature focusing on how education impacts students' ability to move from individualist to structural thinking (Lopez et al., 1998). The research that is available shows that college education is "fairly consistently" (Lopez et al., 1998, p. 308) related to less individualistic conceptions of racial, gender and economic disparities (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Lopez et al., 1998). Kluegel and Bobo (1993) caution however that while individualist thinking may be reduced through education, a reduction in individualist thinking does not necessarily translate into greater structural thinking. Their research, which used years of education as a measure, shows that people with the greatest years of education are less likely to express racial prejudices and less likely to explain racial inequality through an individualist interpretation. At the same time however, they are *not* more likely to provide a structural interpretation (Kluegel & Bobo, 1993). The researchers conclude that even among highly educated individuals, structural explanations for racial inequality are rare. Kluegel and Bobo (1993) also report that number of years of education shows almost no effect on "strong" structuralism. Strong structuralism is the recognition that *current-day* structural inequality couples with historical discrimination to negatively impact Blacks' socioeconomic success. Weak structuralism on the other hand looks strictly to the impact of historical forms of discrimination, such as slavery, without recognition of contemporary racist institutional arrangements (Kluegel & Bobo, 1993).

Kluegel and Smith (1986) believe that one reason for the lack of threat to the dominant belief is that the dominant ideology is thought to explain how the stratification system *ought* to work and so there is “some elasticity in the face of apparent exceptions” (p. 28). This means that specific examples of failures in the system can be seen as exceptions while the overriding meritocratic premise of the availability of opportunity remains intact. For example, even if a person recognizes that racial discrimination does exist, because Blacks are seen as a “numerical minority” (p. 28) the system is viewed as working for the majority of people. Further, because most people view racial discrimination as the work of a few prejudiced individuals and not as imbedded in social systems (Bidell et al., 1994; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Brown et al., 2003; Goodman, 2001; Tatum, 1992), challenges to opportunities for Blacks are seen as limited, specific to individual Blacks, and therefore do not question the overall validity of the meritocratic system. For those with this perspective, the solution to racial discrimination is to reduce racial prejudice among prejudiced people, not to examine the social structures. As a result, the dominant merit ideology stays intact.

If on the other hand, racial discrimination is conceptualized as embedded in social structures, then the social system is understood to be inherently unfair and the meritocratic ideology is challenged. Kluegel and Smith (1986) warn however that even this challenge can still be “deflected by the processes of compartmentalization” (p. 29) and not threaten a core belief in the dominant ideology. As described earlier, compartmentalization is a response to a psychological need to “permit some inconsistency in beliefs in the service of cognitive efficiency” (p. 28). Kluegel and Smith (1986) report that the desire for cognitive efficiency may allow individuals to maintain

two sets of seemingly contradictory beliefs. They explain this complex cognitive function as follows:

The individual might have substantial motivation to maintain each of these beliefs and would probably find it both difficult and psychologically costly to bring them into confrontation and resolve the potential contradiction. Research shows that, in general, people do not take this course, preferring to reap the psychological benefits of maintaining both beliefs simultaneously... The structures and processes of social cognition thus provide definite bases for potential inconsistency and ambivalence in people's reaction to complex, multifaceted realities such as inequality in society (p. 21)

The authors believe that for education to create a shift in thinking from an individual to a structural analysis, there must be exposure to a "comprehensive counterideology that can show the implications of the challenging beliefs and their inconsistency with the dominant ideology" (Kluegel & Smith, 1986 p. 36). The challenge to the ideology must be presented within a situation or circumstance that allows the individual to examine the inconsistencies that the new information presents.

This finding is consistent with work by Lopez, Gurin and Nagda (1998) who found that participation in a course on intergroup relations and conflict was able to shift students' patterns of causal thinking toward greater recognition of the structural sources of racial inequality. The course readings and lecture material demonstrated how structural arrangements in the political system, the economy, and social life produce or reinforce intergroup inequality. The researchers stress, however, that in addition to the content of course materials, the course format was key to the change in thinking demonstrated by the students. The use of an "active learning" (Kolb, 1984) pedagogy was an important component in helping students move from an individual-level to a structural-level analysis. Active learning techniques include case studies, discussion, videos, role plays, out-of-class action projects, simulations, and critical reflection of personal experiences

(Adams, 1997). Lopez and her colleagues assert that because the course material contradicts the dominant ideology, students must have a chance to work with it in active ways - thus allowing students to “examine the roots of their thinking, consider alternative possibilities, and transform their own thinking through generalization and application” (Lopez et al., 1998, p. 325). The researchers conclude that when course materials focusing on structural causes of racial inequality are presented in an active learning format, it is possible for the socially and culturally reinforced dominant ideology to be challenged.

While there is little research directly focused on individualist vs. structuralist viewpoints of racial inequality, the cognitive development literature focusing on the development of complex thinking can also inform our discussion. These theories argue that the ability to reason more complexly can enhance awareness of the contradictions between the individualistic ideals espoused by U.S. culture and the structural realities of racial oppression (Adams & Zhou-McGovern, 1994; Bidell et al., 1994; Broido, 2000; King & Shuford, 1996). There is one study in particular, steeped in the cognitive development literature, that directly addresses the movement from individualistic to structural thinking. I will look at the implications of this study and then will look at other associated cognitive development literature.

Thomas Bidell and his colleagues (1994) examined the development of White college students’ conceptualizations of racism from individualistic to systemic. The study used a developmental framework created by the authors based on the theories of Perry (1968) and others (including Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Kitchener & King, 1981). Their “conceptualization of racism” model is based on the assumption that

the ability to think about racism as systemic involves increasingly more complex thinking and perspective taking. The model predicts a five-step developmental sequence from dualistic to systemic conceptions of racism among young White adults (Bidell et al., 1994, p.186).

Step 1, *individual prejudice* is characterized by simple, dualistic thinking. Racism is seen as something possessed by individuals and expressed as outward hostility or simple prejudice toward others with no recognition of the broader system of racial dominance. Students advance to step 2, *individual prejudice conflicted* when encounters with alternate viewpoints or inconsistent evidence creates recognition of the limitations of dualistic thinking. When students begin to recognize that there are multiple factors involved in racism, Step 3, *multiplicity of inequalities* is reached. Although racism at this step is seen as complex, the individual factors are still viewed in dualistic terms without recognition of the interrelations between them. Step 4, *partial system of inequality* is achieved when students begin to recognize the links between the various factors of racism and begin to see the systemic nature of it. And finally, once students can articulate the interrelated nature of the “oppressed” and “oppressor” roles and understand the systemic privilege afforded to White people in the United States, they are thought to have reached Step 5, titled, *systemic racism*.

Students participating in Bidell’s study were asked to answer two open-ended questions at the beginning and the end of a semester-long social diversity course. The first of the two questions asked students to explain their understanding of the nature of racism and the second asked them to describe what they thought the cause of racism to be. Analysis of the first questionnaire (given at the beginning of the semester) showed

most of the student participants to be at Step 1 (individual prejudice). This finding is consistent with the reports of others who teach about racism in the college classroom and find that their students often view racism as individual bias or hostility without a clear understanding of the broader systemic nature of the problem (Goodman, 2001; Sleeter, 1995; R. Smith, 1998; Tatum, 1992). This finding is also consistent with the kind of dualistic thinking that high school and young college students have been found to employ with other complex conceptual domains (Adams & Zhou-McGovern, 1994; Bidell et al., 1994; Kitchener & King, 1981; Perry, 1968). Analysis of the second questionnaire (given at the end of the semester) revealed that about half of the students showed an increase of at least one step and over a quarter of the students made two and three step gains. Bidell and his colleagues believe that their findings show that some of the resistance to learning about complex social problems such as racism is related to the cognitive level of the students. So while a student may seem to simply be refusing to consider alternative perspectives that contradict the dominant ideology, it may also be that the student lacks the ability to see and understand an abstract issue such as a “social system” or to contradict that system with specific examples of structural inequalities (Bidell et al., 1994). The authors argue, “To analyze the nature of a complex social justice issue such as racism and to grasp one’s own place within it is a difficult conceptual task, not just a matter of attitude” (Bidell et al., p. 186).

Cognitive developmental theorists share the view that multicultural thinking is also cognitively complex thinking (Adams & Zhou-McGovern, 1994; Astin, 1993; Bliming, 2001; Goodman, 2001; Gurin, 2003; King & Shuford, 1996; Pascarella et al., 2001). The cognitive development literature argues that the movement from an

individualist to a structuralist view can be described and understood as a movement from a concrete, dichotomous way of thinking to thinking that is multilayered and nuanced enough to make sense of the contradictions inherent in understanding systemic racism.

King and Shuford (1996) outline the *reflective judgment model* (King & Kitchener, 1994; Kitchener & King, 1981) and argue that “a multicultural view is a more cognitively complex view.” As a way to illustrate their model, the authors present three structurally different student beliefs about affirmative action within the context of various levels of cognitive development. They outline these students’ statements to illustrate three increasingly complex ways of thinking about affirmative action policies. As students’ level of cognitive development increases so does their structural understanding of social justice issues as demonstrated by their descriptions of affirmative action. This analysis is helpful for the framing of the present study since we know that individuals who hold structuralist stratification beliefs are more likely to support race-targeted policies such as affirmative action (Hughes & Tuch, 2000; Kluegel & Bobo, 1993; Kluegel & Smith, 1986).

Adams and Zhou-McGovern (1994) used the Measure of Epistemological Reflection (MER) based on the cognitive development work of Perry (1968) and augmented by Belenky et al. (1986) and the Defining Issues Test (DIT) based on the moral development work of Kohlberg (1971), to examine the socio-moral cognitive development journey of students in a fourteen week “diversity core course” in which racism and other forms of oppression were the focus. They found that students taking the course moved from “late dualism” to “multiplistic” and “early relativistic” epistemology within the semester, with particular gains among third and fourth year students.

The conceptualization of racism model (Bidell et al., 1994) as well as the more general work of constructive developmental theorists building on Perry's original scheme is helpful as a framework for understanding the ways in which individuals comprehend and interact with conceptions of racism. It provides a framework from which to view the cognitive tasks influencing the perspectives of the students in my study. There is a tremendous need, however, for research that looks specifically at how White college students, who have internalized a meritocratic worldview are able to first recognize, then understand and explore the contradictions and eventually come up with an analysis of racism that acknowledges the structural perpetuation of racial inequality.

The ideology of meritocracy is part of the fabric of this country and part of the socialization of its citizens. Since most college students rely on "automatic" (Gurin, 1999) thinking, classroom challenges to meritocratic thinking are also challenges to automatic thinking. As this review illustrates, college courses that deal with racism can present students with the kinds of cognitive conflicts, contradictions and dissonance that are important for the development of more complex, structural thinking. These courses contribute to the enhancement of both learning and civic outcomes for students (Gurin, 1999; Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado, 1999). Research is still needed, however, to explore the processes which lead to students' ability to recognize the role that meritocracy plays in disguising racial inequality. To this date, there have not been studies that help us dissect this critical process in developing students' ability to understand the systemic nature of racism.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Overall Approach and Rationale

This study employs in-depth individual interviews and qualitative methods of analysis to investigate how White college students describe and explain how people achieve success in a racially stratified society that professes to be a meritocracy. I chose to use qualitative research methodology for this study because I wanted to hear and describe students' thoughts, values, assumptions, feelings, and beliefs as young White individuals growing up in a society that is infused with a deeply-entrenched merit ideology (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Researchers have conducted a great deal of quantitative survey research on the general White adult population about ways merit ideology impacts White people's attitudes about racial policies (Bobo et al., 1997; Bobocel et al., 1998; Kinder & Mendelberg, 2000; Sears et al., 2000). However, there has been little qualitative research examining how White college students' understand the relationship between meritocracy and racial inequality (Chesler et al., 2003). While the statistics produced from the plethora of surveys are important, the fact that survey data limits participant responses to static categories may mean that these studies do not reveal the underlying complexities in how students make meaning of the issues (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Feagin et al., 2001). I enjoy Feagin's (2001) comparison of the limitations of survey data on White racial attitudes to a satellite photograph of a city. He explains:

We see the city as it dissolves into the countryside, the broad patterns of streets and blocks but to understand the daily rhythm of life in that city, we must come down to earth and walk the streets (p. 190).

Survey data gives us a “distant portrait” of Whites’ attitudes, while in-depth data are required to really understand the issues as the students see them. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) argue that it is through qualitative research that we are best able to “grasp the processes by which people construct meaning and to describe what those meanings are” (p. 38). I believe that illuminating this complexity through the students’ own words is vital to understanding how the White student in this study conceptualize the issues of meritocracy and racial inequality.

Research Questions

In order to gain insight into White college students’ perceptions of American merit ideology, and racial inequality, I used in-depth individual interviews. These interviews explored how the students think people achieve success in U.S. society, how they explain racially-based economic inequality, and whether or not they think the U.S. is a meritocratic society. The following questions guide this study:

1. How do traditional-aged White college students describe and explain how individuals achieve success in U.S. society?
2. How do traditional-aged White college students explain the level of economic inequality that exists between Black and White Americans?
3. How do traditional-aged White college students describe and explain the concept of meritocracy as it relates to the contemporary United States?

The following is a description of how some of the terms embedded in the research questions have been defined in this study.

Traditional-aged

For the purposes of this study, traditional-aged college students will be defined as students who are between the ages of 18 and 22 years old.

Success

For the purposes of this study, I will define success as a person achieving the level of education, employment, and income that allows him or her to live a comfortable and financially stable life.

Racial inequality

Racial inequality is an outcome of the larger phenomenon of racism. For the purposes of this study it will refer specifically to the unequal ways that economic resources are distributed in U.S. society based on racial categories. Further, this study will focus specifically on exploring perspectives about racial inequality between Black and White Americans.

Meritocracy

I define meritocracy as a social system in which rewards and status are distributed on the basis of an individual's own efforts and ability and not according to their racial, gender, religious, class or another group membership (Garcia, 2001; Hochschild, 1995; Lawson & Garrod, 2000; Sears et al., 2000).

Participants

A total of 20 White undergraduate students were interviewed for this study. At the time of the interview, they were all enrolled at a large public University in the Northeast.

I used a stratified sample to select participants based on their a) involvement in co-curricular and curricular activities that focus on issues of race and racism, b) gender, and c) year in college.

Current research linking diversity and learning suggests that when White college students interact across race, enroll in diversity courses, and participate in diversity-related events and dialogues they develop dispositions and skills associated with active thinking, perspective taking, and racial and cultural engagement on the college campus (Gurin, 1999; Gurin et al., 2002). Therefore involvement, or lack thereof, in classes or student activities that focus on racism was established as a selection criterion for this study. Students who had completed several classes that examined racism, or have taken active roles in student clubs or organizations that addressed racism were identified as “engaged with issue of racism.” Students who were not actively involved in courses or co-curricular activities related to race or racism were identified as “not-engaged with issues of racism.” These students had taken no more than one class that included issues of racism and were not involved in clubs or organizations focused on issues of racism. For ease of discussion, these two groups will be referred to throughout the study simply as “engaged” and “not-engaged.”

I also stratified the sample along the background characteristics of gender and year in school. As described in Table 1, half of the students identify themselves as female and the other half as male. Eight were in their first or sophomore year of college while twelve were either in their junior or senior year. I used this selection criterion because previous studies have suggested that women tend to be more open to diversity issues than men (Hurtado et al., 2002; Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Terenzini, & Nora, 2001) and are

more likely to attribute racial inequality to structural rather than individual factors (Mitchell, 2000). Also general trends show that students tend to develop more complex thinking abilities (Goodman, 2001) and move in the direction of greater tolerance of individual differences as they progress through college (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Table 1
Stratification of Participants

	Engaged with Racism (n=10)		Not Engaged with Racism (n=10)	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
First Year & Sophomores (n=8)	2	2	2	2
Juniors and Seniors (n=12)	3	3	3	3

The sample was not specifically stratified along the lines of academic major, however I tried to balance the number of students enrolled in specific academic disciplines. The group represents 14 different academic majors encompassing a wide variety of disciplines including the arts, engineering, business and science. Table 2 details the background characteristics of students identified as engaged and Table 3 details the background characteristics of students identified as not-engaged.

Table 2
Participant Background Characteristics: Engaged Students

Name	Gender	Year in School	Academic Major
Dan	Male	Senior	American Studies Women's Studies
Kia	Female	Junior	Women's Studies
Julie	Female	Junior	Bio-Chemistry Pre-Med
Derek	Male	Junior	Sociology
Susan	Female	Sophomore	Social Thought & Political Economy
Karen	Female	Junior	Sociology
Martin	Male	Sophomore	Social Thought & Political Economy
Monty	Male	First Year	Engineering
Emily	Female	Sophomore	Social Thought & Political Economy
Mac	Male	Senior	History

Table 3
Participant Background Characteristics: Not-engaged Students

Name	Gender	Year in School	Academic Major
Kim	Female	Junior	History
Sharon	Female	Senior	English
Jonathan	Male	First Year	Economics Political Science
Anne	Female	Junior	Micro-Biology Pre-Med
Mark	Male	Junior	Business
Justin	Male	Junior	Electrical Engineering
Brad	Male	Senior	Accounting
Tony	Male	Sophomore	Theatre
Jamie	Female	First Year	Political Science
May	Female	Sophomore	Political Science

Sixteen of the twenty students said they spent the majority of their growing-up years living in predominantly White environments. Several of the students who said they were from diverse areas also said they lived in predominately White neighborhoods and went to predominately White schools within those diverse towns or cities. Four of the students had lived in racially diverse communities for the first few years of their lives but

then moved to predominantly White areas at a young age. Only two students reported that they had experienced an environment of racial diversity within their town, neighborhood and schools for the majority of their lives. There appears to be no differences in these experiences between engaged and not-engaged students.

Most of the students said they grew up in “middle class” areas and consider themselves middle class. Three said they feel their family is “upper middle class” and that they live in upper middle class neighborhoods. Only one student labeled his family as “working class” and added that he grew up in a military family and that although the structure of military life often obscures class structure, he considers his family to be working class. Several students mentioned that they recognized a variety of economic classes around them while growing up and several others mentioned that they did not really notice social class differences at all while they were growing up. There was not a difference in the actual class backgrounds of engaged and not-engaged students, although engaged students tended to be more specific in their description of their class background and to articulate that they noticed class differences while growing up. Three students identified themselves as the children of immigrants. All three had at least one parent who immigrated to the United States as a young adult.

Participant Recruitment

All participants in this study are White college students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. I used “purposeful sampling” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) to ensure that beyond this initial similarity, the participants in my study represented differences in gender, year in school, academic major, and engagement with issues of racism.

I employed two specific methods to locate participants. First, to develop an initial pool, I administered a short, voluntary questionnaire (Appendix A & B) to students in three different general education classes at the University. All three classes attracted a wide range of majors and class years. After reviewing fifty-seven completed questionnaires, I invited specific students to participate in the study. Eight of the study participants were identified in this manner. All of those were not-engaged students. Their completed questionnaires indicated that they had not taken more than one class that focused on racism and were not involved in clubs or organizations focused on racism. The second method was by personal recommendations from campus staff and faculty members who work with issues of race and racism on campus. Nine of the engaged students were identified in this manner, as were two of the not-engaged students. The final engaged student was recommended to me by another engaged participant. The students who were located through personal recommendations did not complete the questionnaire. I relied on the knowledge of the individual doing the recommendation about the students' level of engagement with issues of racism. I followed up myself if I had specific questions concerning students' previous academic or organizational involvement.

As participants were identified, they were invited to participate in "a qualitative research study focusing on the perspectives of 18-22 year old White college students on the topics of individual achievement and social inequality." They were also told that participation would take between one and two hours of their time. Students were presented with an informed consent letter detailing their involvement (Appendix C). The

letter was given to them at least two days before the interview and they were given ample time at the interview to discuss it and ask questions before signing.

Anticipated benefits for participants include the opportunity to reflect on and express their perspectives and experiences on these issues in a supportive environment. For most White people in our society there is a high level of “silence” around issues of race and racism (Tatum, 1997). This means that White students rarely have the chance to explore their own understanding of race by expressing their experiences, feelings and opinions in a supportive environment (Tatum, 1997). This interview is at least one chance to break that silence. Hopefully this experience will serve to encourage students to seek further opportunities for reflection and exploration.

Data Collection and Management

Because I am interested in the ways that these students understand meritocracy and racial inequality, this study used in-depth individual interviews to capture the meaning of student’s thoughts and beliefs in their own words. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and ranged from approximately 90 - 120 minutes in length. A total of 20 interviews were conducted. The interviews followed an “interview guide approach” (Rossman and Rallis, 1998; p. 124) with a set of pre-determined questions that focus on my research questions (Appendix D).

Each interview was recorded using a tape recorder and high-quality audiotapes. Identities of participants were kept confidential throughout the process. Each participant was assigned a code number and pseudonym. All tapes were transcribed. I transcribed sixteen of the tapes myself and four were done by someone else. To safeguard against

loss, all transcripts were printed on hard copy as well as copied onto a CD, which was stored separately from the computer.

In order to refine and enhance the interview process, I conducted two pilot interviews and then re-assessed the interview protocol and my own skills as an interviewer. As a way to gain feedback as I navigated through the pilot process, I enlisted the help of a “critical friend” (Rossman & Rallis, 1998) also called a “peer reviewer” (O'Lawrence, 2001). The peer reviewer is an individual who has strong experience with conducting qualitative research as well as with working with White college students and the topic of racial inequality. The reviewer read through the first two interview transcripts and provided feedback for me about how I managed the process and how well the protocol appeared to be working to promote rich responses from participants.

Data Analysis Procedures

Rossman and Rallis (1998) summarize qualitative data analysis into the five specific steps of “organizing, familiarizing, building categories, coding, and searching for alternatives” (p. 188). My process followed this general plan. I began by organizing and familiarizing myself with the data by listening to the audiotapes, transcribing the tapes and then thoroughly reading through the transcripts several times.

Within the transcripts, I then identified “salient themes” (Rossman & Rallis, 1998) and “recurring ideas and patterns of belief” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). From these themes and patterns emerged a set of “coding categories” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) that help tell the story of my research questions. I followed Rossman’s (1998) suggestion and coded the data twice. Once I had defined an initial twenty categories, I coded the data appropriately making these abstract categories concrete by representing them through the

words of my participants (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). After this initial coding, I refined and expanded the categories and then combed through the data again and realigned my coding with this new configuration of categories. I used a qualitative analysis software program called HyperResearch to facilitate the mechanics of the coding process.

Next, I organized my established categories in reference to the three specific research questions central to this study. Once organized in this manner I worked with the categories to see how best to present the data. For example, in Chapter Four, I present the students' understanding of the factors critical to the achievement of success. The ten initial categories that relate to this question were easily clustered into three specific themes that I titled *achievement motivation*, *access to resources* and *social group memberships*. Those three themes could then be clustered again based on their relationship to either *individualist* or *structuralist* stratification beliefs. I used a similar clustering technique for each of the other two results chapters. This form of organization was chosen so that my reporting of the results will not only describe the individual categories but also show their relationship to one another and to the larger research question.

During my analysis of the data I referred several times to the survey research and the theories I examined in my literature review. I reviewed these established theories in light of what I had heard from my participants and reflected on the ways that my data coincided with and contradicted the conclusions of the theorists. Once all of my categories were well developed into themes and organized around the three research questions, I examined the data for patterns that may exist among the students' responses

based on their background characteristic of gender, year in school, and level of engagement with issues of racism.

My Role as Researcher

I recognize that my interest in focusing on White students' perceptions of racism is motivated by my own identity as a White person. Some of my most vivid life memories include key points along my own journey as a White person learning about the complexity of racism. I enter this research acknowledging that similar to the way Joel Spring (1998) talks of his research, this project is founded on a "personal quest." At one time, I was that White college student who wholeheartedly believed that affirmative action is reverse discrimination. I was sure that since people of color were no longer legally discriminated against, race-based corrective policies had no place in our society. Indeed, I was fully entrenched in a merit ideology that told me that anyone who worked hard could be successful.

It was not until I was in graduate school and I began to study racism as systemic that I recognized just how narrow and short-sighted my understanding of racism was. Like the majority of White Americans my age, I had conceptualized racism as an issue of individual bias (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Goodman, 2001; Sleeter, 1995; R. Smith, 1998; Tatum, 1992) and felt that if we could just convince people to appreciate everyone regardless of race, racism would disappear. I look back on my innocence with embarrassment and at the same time I recognize that innocence as a byproduct of my citizenship in a society with a pervasive racist ideology that promotes a vision of the United States as fair and just (Bell, 2002; Pierce, 2003). Perhaps the single most important lesson I learned in my discovery of systemic racism was the ways it impacted

my own family. As described in Chapter One, my father emerged from his working-class roots and entered the middle class by way of a college education from the G.I. Bill. Learning about the G.I. Bill and the many other government policies that have helped Whites acquire wealth while limiting the opportunities of people of color, was a turning point in my education. When I was able to recognize the ways that racism is entrenched in U.S. institutions, culture and ideology I came to question the myth of meritocracy and therefore much of the worldview I had previously held – including my own family's journey into the middle class. Ever since attending my first race-relations workshop in high school, I had perceived myself to be an anti-racist person. And although I had good intentions, my ability to create change was limited because I did not have an accurate understanding of the ways racism operated in the United States. My own education about racism has been an eye-opening, frustrating, and at times, devastating experience. It is tough to have the ideals you believe in turned up-side down on you at a time in your life when you actually thought you had things figured out.

Now, as an educator about racism, I hope to gain a better understanding of the perceptions my students bring to my classroom so that I may prepare more effective lessons and materials with the goal of expanding White students' understanding of the complex nature of racism in the United States. I feel I possess a level of empathy for the naiveté of White college students that has helped me to embrace what they have to say as well as a desire to use what they tell me to improve the practice of teaching about racism.

Because of my own past experiences and beliefs, during the research process I experienced the challenges posed by what Foster (1994) calls my "insider" status. I had to keep in mind the similarity I share with the students I interviewed. I had to continually

question my understanding of the data to be sure that I was not making assumptions about what participants said or *did not say* based on the my own experiences. I had to be very conscious of my desire to “fill in the gaps” based on my own past perspectives and understanding. At times this was not easy. The wide range of comments I heard from students in this study was familiar to me. I have previously heard many of these comments from White students in classes I have taught, some in the context of conversations I have had with White friends and family members, and many of them I have said myself at some point along my own educational journey. I had to work very hard to try to approach the students’ comments with fresh eyes and without assumptions. As I said, this was not always an easy process. For example, in the initial stages of data analysis, through guidance from my dissertation chair (an experienced anti-racism educator and qualitative researcher), I recognized that several of my original categories reflected assumptions about what I thought students were saying. I had to dissolve several of these categories, go back to the data, slow down and listen more closely to what the students were actually telling me.

Overall, I found it very easy to listen to the majority of students in this study. I admit however that there were a few times when I had to work hard to suppress the *teacher* in me who wanted to emerge in response to comments that sounded particularly naïve. I noticed this reaction was strongest when students gave examples that explained racial inequality as the responsibility of the attitudes and behaviors of Black individuals. In these situations I had to consciously remind myself that my role was to gather information not to share it. Because I had a sincere interest in what the students had to

say, I was able to put aside my impulse to challenge misinformation and continue to listen to the students.

In addition to my personal biography, I recognize that my selection of the literature, methodology, questions and analysis of the subsequent data are also guided by three specific conceptual frameworks that I bring to the study. First is a social construction lens which recognizes that the origin and evolution of human social categories such as race have been dictated over time and continue to be shaped by society (Omi & Winant, 1986; Smedley, 1999). The second is a social oppression lens which assumes that the statuses assigned to socially constructed group categorizations are maintained through systems of power and privilege (Bell, 1997; Hardiman & Jackson, 1997; Young, 1990). And finally, the third is a strong belief in the value of investigating history to help understand present-day oppression and attitudes (Schmidt, 2005).

Trustworthiness

All forms of social science research must be able to stand up to “canons of quality” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). These canons include the need to answer basic questions about how credible the research findings are; how applicable they are to other settings or groups; the possibility of replication; and how well they reflect the participants' experiences as opposed to the personal biases of the researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). It is incumbent upon the researcher to build strategies for trustworthiness into the design of the study (Creswell, 1994; O'Lawrence, 2001; Rossman & Rallis, 1998).

One important strategy for trustworthiness that I implemented is the concept of “researcher reflexivity” (O'Lawrence, 2001; Rossman & Rallis, 1998). This refers to the

researcher's continual self-reflection of how their personal biography, biases and interests shape the design and implementation of the study as well as the conclusions drawn from the data. This is particularly important because while I agree with Locke and colleagues (2000) that the "social contract" among scholars dictates that "everyone tells the truth as well as he or she can know it" (p. 25), I also believe that we have to closely examine the "truths" that we think we "know." Likewise, Rossman and Rollis (1998) state that as qualitative researchers we may seek to present our participant's worldview as honestly as possible, although our rendition is still simply our own interpretation. Therefore, as explained in the section titled "my role as researcher," it was important that throughout the research process I continually examined how my personal biography shaped my rendition of what I saw as truths.

Along with thorough documentation of the study, an additional tool that helped with reflexivity was keeping a research journal. This journal has been a running record of the ways my thinking has emerged about all aspects of the study. It documents all research activities including my questions, my frustrations, and my ideas as well as my insights, my "break-throughs," and my "break-downs." Within the journal I also wrote "interim analytic memos" to document the "intellectual odyssey" of my study and thereby help to establish the study's rigor for my readers (Rossman & Rallis, 1998).

And finally, I have kept easily accessible records of all aspects of the process including copies of all audiotapes, transcripts, notes, analytic memos, and my research journal so that the process is well documented and may be confirmed at any time if need be.

Limitations

This study is limited to exploration of the perspectives of one small group of traditionally-aged White college students at a large public University in the Northeastern United States. Generalizability is impacted by the small sample size that was constrained by the time-consuming nature of in-depth interviewing. While this group may represent a variety of academic majors, class years, levels of development and other social group memberships, they do not represent all White college students in the Northeast or the United States. The results of this study are a reflection of these students' particular experiences and perspectives. Of note is the fact that by choosing a "traditionally-aged" group of college students to study, my findings reflect the opinions of a generational cohort born between the years of 1982 – 1986. Certainly the perspectives and opinions expressed by the students in this study have been shaped by living in the U.S. during this particular time period.

As an additional parameter, this study does not encompass all aspects of White students' understanding of racial inequality. It is concerned specifically with the ways that students understand the concept of meritocracy in conjunction with economic inequality between Black and White Americans.

My own subjectivity and bias based on my own experiences as a White person raised in U.S. society creates an inevitable filter through which I conducted the interviews and analyzed the data. By the same token, my identity as a White person could potentially influence the participants' responses to the questions. Because talking about race and racism is not always easy or comfortable for White people, students' answers to questions may have been different if I had not been White. Likewise, student responses

could have been different if I were a man or were younger or a lot older than I am. Further, there is always the potential that the issue of social desirability may have impacted some of the students' responses. In other words, some students may have managed their answers to fit the responses that they thought I was expecting. Keeping all these factors in mind, I acknowledge that my analysis relies on self-reported data. I took the students words at face value, without questioning the sincerity of motivation of their responses.

Ethical Considerations

I entered this study with the belief that every person has the right to privacy in regards to their own thoughts, opinions, actions, experiences, and life stories. Because of this belief, I view the sharing of such information as a gift to me as a researcher. It has been my responsibility to safeguard the trust of my participants by conducting my study within the boundaries of strong ethical standards. With this in mind, I implemented the following list of procedures which have been suggested by Locke, Spirduso and Silverman (2000) and are in accordance with the University of Massachusetts Human Subjects Guidelines.

- Participants were informed of the general nature of the study and the time and effort needed from them.
- The identity of participants has been kept confidential and participants were informed of the procedures for protecting their anonymity.
- A voluntary consent form was presented to participants. Ample time was provided for questions about the form and a copy of the form was provided to the participant.

- It was made clear to participants that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence or reprisal.
- Participates were provided with my name and full contact information as well as that of my committee chair, Ximena Zúñiga, and were encouraged to contact either of us if they have any questions or concerns about their involvement in the study.

CHAPTER 4

FACTORS OF SUCCESS

Introduction

The first research question of this study asks: “How do traditionally-aged White college students describe and explain how individuals achieve success in U.S. society?” To explore this question, I asked students to tell me how they think they will achieve success someday, how their parents did and why some people in our society are successful and others are not. I found these young people, who are essentially on the eve of their own quest for success, had a lot to say on the topic. Through their ideas, stories and examples, I identified ten themes that recurred throughout the interviews. I refer to these ten themes as “factors of success” because each was seen by students as a factor that contributes to a person’s ability to be successful in the United States. As shown in Table 4, I have organized the ten factors of success along three thematic clusters: *achievement motivation*, *access to resources*, and *social group membership*. Achievement motivation is related to possession of specific personal attributes such as self-motivation and the willingness to work hard. Access to resources refers to a person’s access to money, education or family support. Social group membership refers to social categories that individuals belong to based on race, socio-economic class or gender.

Table 4
Factors of Success

THEMATIC CLUSTERS		
Individual Level	Structural Level	
Achievement Motivation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hard Work • Self-motivation 	Access to Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Going to College • Access to a Good Education • Access to Money • Support System • Connections 	Social Group Memberships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Race • Class • Gender

I noticed that not included in this list of factors is the issue of innate talent, knowledge, or intelligence. Only two students referenced intellect and both did so very briefly in the context of how they felt their own level of intelligence will help them in the future. Individual talent is traditionally considered one of the components of meritocracy (McNamee & Miller, 2004). It appears however that the issue did not resonate with the majority of these students. Additionally, moral character and integrity is also often considered part of the “cultural folklore of meritocracy” (McNamee & Miller, 2004). Only one student in this study mentioned moral character. For this student being a “loyal and honest person” was a key to success. This student stood apart from his peers because this issue was not mentioned by any other student.

I have chosen to present the three thematic clusters by focusing on the individual level phenomena first and then structural level phenomena second. The theme of achievement motivation is an individual level phenomena because it involves personal characteristics related to an individuals’ desire to succeed. Access to resources and social group memberships on the other hand are viewed as structural factors, outside of an

individual's direct control. Significantly, the individual and structural level clusters also correspond to *individualist* and *structuralist* stratification beliefs. As discussed in the literature review, an individualist perspective holds that since individual outcomes are thought to be proportional to an individual's level of talent and effort, the resulting inequality of rewards is seen as equitable and fair (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). This is in contrast to a structuralist interpretation that focuses instead on social factors that can systematically impact access and outcomes while rejecting the belief that there is an inherent fairness of opportunity (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). The theme of achievement motivation falls within individualist stratification beliefs while the themes of access to resources and social group membership fall within structuralist stratification beliefs (Kluegel & Smith, 1986).

The remainder of this chapter will present an overview of the students' reflections on the factors within each of the three thematic clusters. I will first describe the cluster and then I will describe my findings for each of the corresponding factors of success. For each specific factor I will use the student's words to help the reader envision how the students understand each of the factors. Finally, I will describe the patterns I observed based on participants' gender, year in school or status as engaged or not-engaged with issues of racism.

Thematic Cluster: Achievement Motivation

This thematic cluster encompasses factors associated with an individual's motivation to achieve. Factors such *hard work* and *self-motivation* are conceptualized in the literature as related to an individual's desire or need to achieve success (McClelland, 1985). Specifically, achievement motivation is defined as "The desire to accomplish

something, to reach a standard of excellence, and to expend effort to excel” (Sandrock, 2003). This theme deals with personal strengths or values possessed by an individual as distinct from the other themes that focus on life circumstances and group identity factors. The idea of hard work is particularly seen as an essential ingredient for success. Indeed survey research shows that Americans mention “hard work” more frequently than any other single factor associated with “getting ahead” (McNamee & Miller, 2004, p. 35).

The personal attributes of hard work and self-motivation were common explanations for the achievement of success among the students of this study. Each of the factors was mentioned by almost three quarters of all students. Both were offered as factors that can help explain why participants’ parents were successful and both were predicted to be factors that will play a role in the ability of the students to experience success in their own futures. In the next section, I begin by describing students’ responses related to hard work and then recount their understanding of self-motivation as a contributing factor of success.

Hard Work

Hard work was one of the most frequently cited explanations students gave for the achievement of success. Almost three quarters of the students proposed the idea of hard work or the need to work hard in order to be successful. The factor of hard work was presented in several important contexts. It was:

- offered as a factor in the success that participants’ parents or grandparents had achieved;
- seen as a lesson participants had learned about how to be successful themselves; and,

- described as something that can help a person overcome obstacles that might otherwise get in the way of their success.

The most common reference to hard work was in relationship to the achievement of success by participants' parents or grandparents. When I asked the question "What factors do you think went into getting your parents to where they are now?" just over a quarter of the students listed "hard work" as one of those factors. These students said things such as, "they're both really hard workers and they earned their way" or "I guess they just worked really hard. They didn't let anything get in their way" or, "he works tremendously hard, he has a work ethic that is ridiculous."

Several students observed that they had learned as a child that hard work was an important factor in a person's ability to achieve success. One stated that the notion was taught in a very general sense saying, "That is instilled into our heads from when we are little. So you gotta work hard." The other two pointed directly to role modeling from parents and other family members who they labeled as "hard workers" as the source of this lesson. Only two participants offered hard work as a specific factor in their own future success. They both mentioned hard work in conjunction with a good education focusing on "hard work in school" and then "hard work once I get a job." For many of the participants, a general assumption seemed to be that if you work hard you can be successful. For example, one student observed,

I think it is reasonable to expect that you can be successful no matter who you are ... I think if you work hard and are loyal and honest which my grandfather was exemplary in all of those. I think you can achieve success or at the very least live a good life.

For several participants it appeared that hard work would help a person be successful even in the face of obstacles or recognized roadblocks including racial

discrimination or poverty. For example, in the context of getting into college, one student told me, "you gotta work for it and you will get there and be successful." When I asked this student if she thought it was harder from some people to be able to go to college because of economic reasons she reiterated that hard work could overcome economic obstacles, saying, "Oh yeah definitely but there are ways. Like you gotta work hard and you gotta figure out how to get there." Another participant argued that through hard work anything can be achieved. Specifically she said, "if you have the guts to actually work your butt off, you can achieve anything that you want." This participant gave the specific example of an African American friend of hers who, through hard work and determination had overcome poverty and neglect by a drug-addicted single mother, to earn a college degree and become a successful businesswoman.

Another student pointed to hard work as a way to overcome racial discrimination in the workplace. This student says that although he does believe that there is "some racial inequality" in the workplace, hard work can balance that out because "whichever one works harder, the person who works harder, does more, knows more, will be hired, so I don't think racial inequality plays a role in that part."

I saw virtually no difference in the way that men and women described hard work or the ways that first and second year students versus juniors and seniors spoke about hard work. I did however notice some differences concerning how engaged and not-engaged students talked about this particular factor. There appears to be more difference of opinion among engaged and not-engaged students concerning this factor than any other factor. The first difference is the fact that all ten of the not-engaged students mentioned hard work while only three of the ten engaged students did. Of the three

engaged students who referred to hard work, two of them spoke of it in relation to their parents' success, one listing it after also listing family pressure and the fact that her father was in the right profession at the right point in history to have a successful career.

Interestingly, the one engaged student who listed hard work as the first factor in his parent's success also said the following at a later point in his interview,

I know that if my father went in to a job and had the same qualifications as a Black man who went in to a job, if the whole committee that was interviewing him was all White my father is nine times out of ten going to get the job. Not necessarily because my father is more qualified but because he is White.

So although his first reaction was to list hard work as a factor in his parent's success, this student obviously recognizes that race also played a role in what his father has achieved.

Such a perspective differs from most not-engaged students who did not also acknowledge other possible contributing factors.

Another engaged student brought up the issue of hard work not to say that he felt it was an important part of being successful but instead to argue that there is a misconception in this country that hard work automatically leads to success.

First of all I think there is this idea that the United States is a meritocracy. That hard work will get you anywhere that anyone can achieve anything and that it is very common to move up in class and all of that. And I don't think that is true necessarily. So I think that success has a lot to do with access to what materials you have.

From these interviews is it apparent that engaged and not-engaged students conceptualize the impact of hard work in very different ways. Not-engaged students tended to believe that hard work is a critical component of achieving success and that a willingness to work hard can help an individual overcome barriers posed by limited resources. Engaged students on the other hand tended to think that hard work may be

mediated by other demographic or resource-related factors and that in fact, it can be deceiving to believe that hard work alone will create success.

Self-Motivation

The personal attributes of “drive,” “desire,” and “determination” were considered by some students as important to a person’s ability to achieve success. Over half of all participants brought up similar qualities that I have placed under the heading of *self-motivation*. Students used the concept of self-motivation in several different contexts:

- as an explanation for why their parent(s) and other family members have achieved success;
- as one of the factors that will help them to achieve success in their own lives;
- to explain why some people are successful and some people are not; and,
- to explain why Blacks are less successful than Whites.

When I asked students to tell me how their parents were able to achieve success, a quarter of them pointed specifically to characteristics like self-motivation and or determination as a contributing factor. These students used words like “driven,” “focused,” and “self-motivated” to describe how their parents were able to accomplish things like being the first in their family to go to college or obtaining a professional level job, and in the case of one student’s parents, very high-level professional positions.

When I asked each of the students if they thought they would be successful in their own lives, several spoke directly about how their own level of self-motivation will impact their ability to be successful. A student from an upper middle class household with two parents who have jobs with a great deal of status said that he believes he will be

successful because he has the “determination and passion” that helped his parents be very successful. Another student said that one of the keys to achieving success is “a lot of determination and knowing what you want beforehand.” This student thinks he will be successful because he knows what he wants, will work to get it, and will just “keep going and going” until he is successful. Other students spoke enthusiastically about the determination they have which will help them be successful by saying things such as:

If you stick with something you love and you never give up no matter what the cost, something is going to work out for you. Something always has to work out.

I have always just known that I am stubborn enough and determined enough that it will happen and I won't stop until it does.

Some people call it obstinate; I like to call it persistent. When there is something I am very passionate about I am very driven.

I asked each of the participants to tell me why they thought that some people in our society were more successful than others. About a quarter of the students offered characteristics related to self-motivation as the first of the factors that they listed. For example, one said, “I think that some people want to do well and want to live the nice life. Want to make a lot of money and some people really don't care, they don't try. They don't want to go to college and learn from it.” When I asked this student to name some of the reasons that it might be harder for some people to be able to go to college than others, she commented that “financial status” might be a problem but that people should be able to “work around it and figure out a way” by searching for “financial aid, grants, loans” if they “want to badly enough.” When I asked another student why some people are more successful than others she said, “the drive behind themselves.” She then went on to elaborate and gave the example of an African American friend, (previously noted as an

example of hard work) who recently graduated from college and started a management job in Manhattan after working hard to move beyond the circumstances of her life.

She has not lived the best life, her mother is a drug addict, she has a sister that is living with a man that beats her, her other sister is in the Army, her brother is in the Army, they don't have a very good life. But she is the first one in her family to get through and it's because of her self-motivation and her drive. It's like, "I'm getting the life that I want."

I asked her how she thought her friend was able to go to college considering that no one else in her family had. The student again said that her friend's success was due to her motivation "she's just one of those people that she just drove herself to it."

From a similar perspective, another student proposed that anyone could be successful, even if there are "outside uncontrollable factors that could cause one to not be successful," as long as they "really want to work through it because you can work through anything." When I asked her to give an example of "uncontrollable factors" that could get in the way of success, she made the following observation:

Well, while I was waiting for you I was reading the pamphlet in the hall about child abuse. That is something that puts someone at quite a disadvantage and it is not really their fault. The same friend with the dairy cows, her mom runs a foster home and watching the kids that go through there. Some of the ones that did the best after getting out of these situations had like the worst stories but they were motivated to do better. And then there were some that did not have very bad stories at all and they just didn't care.

A few students spoke directly about self-motivation to help them answer my question about why Blacks have achieved less economic success in the U.S. than Whites. Each said that they felt Blacks were less motivated toward success than Whites were saying things such as "maybe the Black males don't try as hard," "I don't know if Black people have that same drive," and "maybe they don't have the desire to be in those high positions."

I found no difference in the way that men and women talked about self-motivation or the ways that first and second year versus juniors and seniors did. I did find differences in the way that students grappled with this factor in light of their status as engaged and not-engaged with issues of racism. Although eight not-engaged students brought up the importance of self-motivation in contrast to seven engaged students, the difference came in the contexts in which self-motivation was thought to play a crucial role. The majority of comments that not-engaged students made about the importance of self-motivation focused on the issue of why “some people” are more successful than other people and specifically, some of them explained the lack of economic success among Black people as a result of a lack of self-motivation. In contrast, when engaged students discussed self-motivation, they did so mostly in the context of the impact self-motivation will have on their own success or that of their parents. Only one engaged student mentioned it as a factor in why “some people” are more successful than others and *not one* engaged student offered it as an explanation for the differences in Black and White economic success. In addition, two engaged students talked about the danger of thinking that self-motivation is a factor in success if the context of the individual's race, class and gender status are not taken into account. Instead they both said that self-motivation is just one aspect and it must be seen within the larger context of each individual's life.

You have to look at everything within its context and if you don't contextualize, like especially looking at something like success that it is incredibly problematic and incredibly dangerous because if you were to look at the concept of success and say well, You know, everyone achieves what they want to achieve because of their ambition it completely gives the impression that we all start from the same place and we don't.

No matter what sort of level of personal motivation can be involved, if you are starting below someone else you are not going to get up to them if they have the same level of motivation.

This last student went on to say that people start off on different rungs of a sort of “ladder of opportunity” because,

We don’t always expose everyone to the same number of job opportunities, the same educational experiences, the same lifestyles at the different income levels from the beginning.

She equates these ladders with different forms of oppression,

I think that those ladders can define different types of oppression. You have race-based, I think employment and income, class-based, and gender-based and then all of those have their own sub-categories in terms of who has started off lower. In my impression, those determine why people experience different levels of success. The basic characteristics of motivation and desire for success are there but the competition comes from an un-level playing field. I think often we say it reflects the people themselves. But I think it doesn’t, I think it reflects the structure they are put into to begin with.

Just as was evident with the factor hard work, it is obvious that there are clear differences in the ways that engaged and not-engaged students conceptualize the role of self-motivation in the achievement of success. Not-engaged students expressed the perspective that self-motivation is a critical component to achieving success and that it could help a person overcome barriers posed by limited access to money or education. Engaged students on the other hand stated that self-motivation, like the issue of hard work, must be weighed with other factors in an individual’s life such as their race, class and gender statuses.

The last two engaged students quoted in this section demonstrate a complex understanding of the impact of various social group memberships on an individual’s ability to achieve success. It should be noted however that although these two gave the

most thorough explanation of this issue, they were not the only ones to address it. In fact there does seem to be a level of awareness among many of the students that race, class and gender can influence one's ability to succeed. As many students noted, these social group memberships can present barriers even when a person is motivated and willing to work hard. The final thematic cluster of the factors of success, that of social group memberships, focuses on the students' comments related to race, class, and gender status. In addition to achievement motivation and social group memberships, students also felt that an individual's level of access to material and social resources impacted one's ability to be successful.

Thematic Cluster: Access to Resources

Throughout the interviews, students made many references to the important role that resources play in an individual's ability to achieve success. Students referred specifically to economic resources such as having access to money. They also linked *access to money* to having *access to a good education* and *going to college*. Beyond economic resources, students also suggested what Pierre Bourdieu (1992) describes as "social capital." This resource includes the social networks that people have such as a *family support system* as well as *connections* with people who can help one gain access to money, jobs, college, etc. Having access to a variety of resources, particularly economic resources, was seen as an important component of success by many students. Every student I interviewed mentioned either access to money, going to college, or access to a good education as a factor in success. Six students mentioned all three. The following is a summary of how students describe the impact that these resources have on an individual's ability to be successful.

Going to College

Going to college was the most often cited factor in achieving success. Three quarters of the participants brought up this factor. This is not a surprising finding as all of the participants interviewed were currently in college and presumably would feel that this experience will impact their future success. Students' comments about going to college tended to focus in the following areas:

- the importance of going to college in order to get a good job;
- the influence of parents and the environment on college attendance; and,
- the barriers that may prevent people from attending college.

Several students talked about going to college as one of the most important factors in securing quality employment. One student summed it up by saying "You gotta go to college. You can't get a good job without college. That is instilled into our heads from when we are little." Others added that college attendance also influences how high up someone can go in their profession and that graduate school is sometimes necessary to be successful in the current job market. One student seemed particularly aware that changes in the structure of the labor market make a college education critical to achieving employment success.

If you can't send your kid to college, there really isn't a place, and it is increasingly becoming so, and it is increasingly becoming so in the future. Manufacturing is gone, the service sector has growth but a lot of service jobs you are going to need a more long-term education than high school.

Students also discussed the various influences that contribute to the likelihood that a person will go to college. Two students explained how their parents had been influenced to go to college by their parents before them. Primary influences were thought to be "family background" and specifically whether or not their parents had also been

college educated. For those whose parents had gone to college, going to college themselves was seen as “following the path” which was expected of them.

Several students proposed that the idea of going to college was “natural” or “just what you do.” These students said that it was something that all of their friends or family members were doing and that “the idea of not going to college is unheard of.” One student pointed out that although going to college was “the next natural step” for her - she did realize that this was not the case for everyone else. She said she knew that the ability to go to college is very much related to “the luck of the draw of who you are born into, like the family life, and class life.” She feels that she “lucked out” and that she is able to go to college now “because of class” and “because of my family.” Other students also recognized a difference in expectations and made comments about how race and class status influence whether or not a person is “expected” to go to college after high school:

Like for White people, we are actually, we are expected to go to college it is almost like assumed you go to college now. But when we talked to the few Black kids that were there, like where they grew up from it was like ‘we are expected to go get a job and start making money for our families and stuff.’ So I think from personal experience like just talking with them and what they said they felt and from what I grew up with like, ‘if you don't go to college, what are you going to do?’

But the fact that they don't go to college, they're not really being pressured to. They were like, down my back like, ‘where are you going? Where are you going?’ And I don't think that that was the case at all in any of the ESL programs or, unless the person spoke fluent English. Like if you could hardly tell if they were Latino at all. That would be the only case they would even have the encouragement. Maybe someone would be like, ‘oh, do you want to take classes at the community college?’ like that would be a good idea. Like that might have been encouraged, but I don't think they were encouraged to go to [the University].

Students recognized that barriers based on a lack of financial and other resources prohibit people from getting into college. Barriers listed included a lack of guidance in high school about preparing for the SAT or help to pick out colleges - particularly if the

high school student's parents have not attended college. Several students spoke directly about a lack of resources in "low class" schools and in "poor Black neighborhoods." One student argued that a student who went to a "poor all Black school" would be less likely to be admitted to a college than a student who went to a "poor all White school." This student also proposed that, on the other hand, people with access to lots money and connections might be able to get into college without necessarily working for it.

But if you are born into a well-off family you can go to a nice school, a private school, you can work somewhat hard and they can help you, they can have you meet different people, they might know some people in college who can get you in and you might be successful just because of where you were born.

The idea of athletic or academic scholarships was mentioned as a way to provide opportunities for people with less financial resources to get into college. Several students added that scholarships and financial aid were the only way they were able to attend college themselves. In the case of these students, money for college was seen as a "roadblock" but it was one they were able to "overcome" through scholarships. Although students expressed a general appreciation for the fact that they were able to be in college, one student said he would much rather have gone to a more prestigious college. Although he had the grades to get in, he felt that the fact that he comes from a "middle class family" limited where he was able to go unless he was willing to "leave college paying loans for the rest of my life." Another student pointed out specifically that even if you have the "skills" to go to college, if you don't have the "financial backing" to get you there, your success may be limited.

As I considered the ways that students characterized the factor going to college, there appeared to be no differences in the ways that students thought about these issues based on their individual background characteristics of gender, year in school or level of

engagement with issues of racism. For many students, going to college was clearly seen as an important factor in the achievement of success. Having access to a quality education before college was also seen as an important factor in achieving success.

Access to a Good Education

Along with having access to higher education, students also saw the value in having access to a quality primary and secondary education. Over half of all participants proposed access to a good education as a factor in achieving success in life. Most who mentioned it also said they thought it was a “big factor” in achieving success. Students’ responses regarding access to a good education focused primarily on two areas of concern:

- the link between a person’s ability to obtain a good education and the extent to which they have access to money; and,
- the relationship between racial group membership and access to a good education.

The majority of comments were related to limitations due to a lack of access to money. Since access to money is also one of the ten factors of success, it became obvious that there is a large overlap between these two factors. Many students communicated how closely related these two issues are in that one’s access to money has a direct influence on one’s access to a good education. Specifically students said that access to money has a direct impact on people in terms of “where they are going to be going to school. If they are going to be going to school, and if they are even going to finish high school.” Many comments reflected the idea that people who are “much better off than others” have the ability to send their children to “a private school” or “a nice school” and therefore to help

them to be “well-prepared for the next level” which will have a big impact on their “opportunities to succeed.” One student summed up the cumulative effects of having the money to get a good education by saying,

But from the beginning people are not given equal opportunity in terms of educational attainment... Starting even as early as preschool or kindergarten or a day care program. Then you are kind of, I don't know what the word is but you are kind of on a path to go in one direction and from there you build upon that privilege of getting into accelerated classrooms or getting more attention or access to computers or to specialized teachers whereas some people don't have that access.

Some students spoke specifically about how schools are segregated into poorer and wealthier communities and that in school districts where residents have less economic resources, there is a poorer quality of education. One student said the poor quality of these schools is caused by “low taxes, low funding, poorer teachers,” and another said that as a result of this lower funding, these students “are just going to have a lot less chances later on in life because of that poor education.” Specifically because they “don't get as high scores on standardized testing they don't get in to as good of schools, they don't get as good of jobs and it just keeps going and going. “

Another student pointed out that education is not the only way that poorer communities are in deficit. She cited a relationship between the institution of education and other social institutions in poor areas by saying, “there is a structure that affords certain communities better schools, certain communities better hospitals, certain communities better roads, cleaner streets.”

A few students also drew a correlation between race and class and pointed out that not only is there a relationship between a person's *class* and their access to quality education but that there is also a relationship between a person's *race* and their access to

quality education. Students expressed the opinion that schools that were attended by “mostly Black” students received less funding, are not looked on as highly by admission committees at colleges, and generally are not “as good” as schools that are attended primarily by White children. As a result, they felt that Black students in “Black schools” were “not receiving an education that is equal to White children who are going to school in the suburbs.” Several students looked at their own education for evidence of this. One said, “My high school was one of the best public high schools in the state and it was primarily White. And you tend to find more Black students in Springfield or Worcester or Boston than Southern Central Massachusetts where there are more schools and I don't think the schools are as good.”

As I reviewed the commentary on this factor it struck me that across the board, the remarks made about the importance of education were *not* generally related to the need for a person to work hard in school but were related more to access to quality schools, and opportunities to learn. Almost all of the students seemed to recognize that there is unequal access to a quality education in this country. This recognition cuts across all students' background characteristics - gender, year in school and their level of engagement with issues of racism. This point brings up an interesting inconsistency that I saw occurring throughout the discussion of the achievement of success. As the students discussed the different factors that contribute to an individual's ability to be successful, they often put forth incongruent or at least incomplete arguments about the various factors. This was particularly evident among the not-engaged students. For example, many said that both hard work and access to a good education were critical factors without bringing the two factors together to talk about how a lack of access to a good

education might supersede hard work. I will return to this point in the next section (access to money) and use the students' words to explain this inconsistency more thoroughly.

There were some distinct ways in which engaged and not-engaged students talked about access to a good education. Although about the same number of engaged and not-engaged students mentioned this factor, engaged students tended to talk about the lack of access to a good education as a manifestation of structural poverty. They spoke specifically of a "structure" that results in "lower taxes," "lower funding, and "poorer teachers." Not-engaged students on the other hand spoke in more general terms citing that there are "good schools" and "poor schools." While all students recognized that there was a difference in access to quality education, engaged students spoke in more detail about the structural nature of the inequality that resulted in differing levels of access. It appears from students' comments that most believe that a person's access to a good education is directly impacted by that person's access to money.

Access to Money

Students felt that having access to money has a broad impact on one's ability to succeed. More than half of all students talked about access to money as a factor in a person's ability to achieve success. As I have already described in the previous section, many students stated that a person's access to money is directly related to their access to a good education. Students also brought up the issue of access to money in the contexts of:

- the impact it will have on their own achievement of success; and,
- the relationship of access to money and racial group membership.

Several students recognized that the financial security they grew up with has or will contribute to their own success. Comments showed recognition that not everyone has the "background" that these students have. For example, one student said,

If someone didn't have the background that I have. Say they grew up in a really, like, low class, they couldn't go to college, they couldn't get the right education, so they can't get the right job. ...In my case I have that, so I don't consider that to be a roadblock for me.

Just as some students related a person's access to a good education with racial group membership, students also related access to money with racial group membership.

Several students stated that they thought Black people generally have less access to money than White people.

I think it is socioeconomic status that gets you the good jobs and I just think a lot of Black people because they started off in a lower socioeconomic status for them to climb up to meet our level of playing field I think it is harder because they are starting off at the bottom.

There are actually a lot more Whites who have the money and ability to get into college than Blacks because of the way it has been throughout the years. Because of this problem, a lot of opportunities that Blacks, Hispanics, everybody, Asians fall under, they wouldn't, they wouldn't actually have the chance to get in because they didn't have the right schooling, they don't have enough money, and everything else that goes along, class wise, or whatever.

Significantly both of these comments were made by not-engaged students. At other points in their interviews both of these students said that people should be able to achieve anything they want if they are willing to work hard for it and that race should not be something that necessarily holds them back. This is an example of the inconsistency I saw in many students' responses. The contradictions with which these students are juggling are typical of what I heard from other students. On the one hand they recognize that racism can get in people's way and here they both assert that Blacks have experienced historical disadvantages that impact them today. Yet, on the other hand, they

both also say things such as “if you are willing to work your butt off you can achieve anything” or that “if the Black person works harder than the White person they should be successful.” Throughout the interview they seem to be trying to reconcile two different interpretations of these issues and do not coordinate the two perspectives.

I found no differences in the ways that students refer to this factor based on their gender or year in school. There was a slight difference in this factor based on the students’ engagement with racism. Engaged students tended to place more of an emphasis on the link between access to money and access to quality education than not-engaged students did. Other than this distinction, both groups talked about the issue in fairly similar ways. The biggest exception to this was one not-engaged student who took a position opposite from all of his peers by saying that access to money was actually not all that important in a person’s ability to be successful. In his view, access to money was not a “root factor” in achieving success. He felt that having a “support system” and being a “good person” were more important than having money.

Obviously people that come from money are going to have a greater chance of being financially successful than others but I think maybe you are not going to be a multimillionaire but I think you will be able to do alright for yourself because I think that honesty, trust and loyalty are characteristics that any employer in some field would value a great deal. So I don't think it is impossible to bring yourself up if you are a good person.

While this student took a position very different from his peers concerning the impact of money on a person’s ability to be successful, some students agreed with him that a support system is a factor in achieving success.

Support System

Noting the importance of non-material resources, students brought up the value of having a personal support system. Almost half of the participants considered the importance of having a “support system” as a factor in one’s ability to achieve success. Students talked about support system in the following two specific ways:

- Support within the family – specifically in the form of support from parents; and,
- Support outside the family – specifically in the form of mentors found in schools.

Most comments students made about support systems were within the context of support that people received from their parents. Interestingly, most of those comments focused on support that the students’ parents had received from their own parents about going to college. Students talked about how their parents were “pushed through” by their parents who “wanted things to be better” for their children than they had been for themselves. While I recorded a total of 15 remarks made about family support system, five of those fifteen were made by one student. For this student, a parental support system appears to be the single most important aspect of achieving success. One of his comments reflected that he wants to be successful in his future because he feels his parents have “invested a lot” in him. He also described how a family support system or the lack of one could be critical to any person’s ability to be successful.

Only two students mentioned the importance of having a support system outside the family. They both spoke specifically about the value of mentors in a school setting. One student acknowledged that a mentor from school insured that her father made it to college after high school. The other stated that for her, finding her mentors both in high school and in college was “the most valuable thing” she was able to do to help point her

in the right direction for her future. In the case of these two people, a mentor helped create opportunities for future success.

I found virtually no difference in the ways that men and women discussed access to a support system. I did find however that fewer first and second year students mentioned support system than did juniors and seniors. In fact, this factor was not brought up by any of the first year students and only by one sophomore student. In contrast, it was described by eight juniors and seniors. One could speculate that perhaps as students get further removed from their parental support system they begin to see its value more clearly. Additionally, not-engaged students were twice as likely as engaged students to mention support system as a factor in success. Although not-engaged students were much more likely to bring up the factor of support system, the two groups talked about the issue in very similar ways.

As reported, only two students spoke specifically about mentors as a support system outside of their family. Other students however put forth a similar situation that takes place with people who can help open doors and provide opportunities. I differentiate this factor from that of the role of mentor within a support system because this relationship is more focused on acquiring access to specific opportunities rather than a general sense of support and guidance. The following section focuses on this factor that I titled Connections.

Connections

Social resources can come in the form of knowing people who have the power and influence to help you become successful. Almost half of the students mentioned

connections as an important factor in achieving success. Their comments on this factor focused on:

- connections as a contributing factor in any person's success, including their own; and,
- the ways that connections are differentially available to Black and White Americans.

Several students made comments about how important connections are in general to anyone's achievement of success. They said things such as "everyday I see it's all about connections," "I see many people get things because they know someone," "it really is who you know in the world," and "they might know some people in college who can get you in." One student related the issue to his own life by talking about how he was elected to offices in high school simply because he knew a lot of people in school, not necessarily because he was the best person for the position. Several students also pointed out that often money and connections go hand in hand. One student said, "people with money are the people who get places, or people with connections or with power, it is not just money."

Three participants talked specifically about how they see connections impacting their own future careers. Two of them recognized that contacts they have made already would help them in their careers. Both are White women who want to be teachers and who will try to get a job in the school system where they already know people. As one student put it:

I have a lot of contacts through the school system anyway, through my father and my mother. I already know all, I know the athletic directors. I know all of the principals throughout the whole school system. I know the teachers, I know the Deans. So I'm hoping that through that I will get help.

This student also described the value of the connections she made from being in a sorority in college. She said, "I was also in a sorority and they say if you drop our name and there's someone in there from here, they will help you." She described both her school and sorority connections as, "having an 'in,'" and then reiterated that "It's always good to have an 'in.'"

While most students who mentioned this factor gave one or two remarks about the topic, one participant made six separate comments about the issue. He felt very sure that making connections with the "right" people would be one of the keys to his own success. This student hopes that someday "when I get like really old and I make my connections" to be a Supreme Court Justice. He acknowledges that his ability to make connections with the right people will play an important role in his ability to reach this lofty goal. This student illustrates his plan for making connections:

I have to make personal relations with a lot of corporate people because they support presidential candidates and that way I can kind of schmooze around with presidential candidates and hopefully after talking to them, I can, once I get to know presidential candidates, hopefully one of them will win and be like "hey I remember him, he is really good.... Although I wish it was like, I could apply for it and because I think I am a good person and because of what I did and who I am I would get the job but I know it is connections and who you know.

So while this student acknowledges that this is not the way he *should* get the job, he believes that this is the way these kinds of things actually happen in society.

Four students spoke specifically about how Black and White people have different access to making the kinds of connections that will help them become successful. Some students seemed very confident that there was a clear systemic reason for White people to have greater access to connections. For example, one student asserted,

There is the "good old boy" system. And the vast majority of people who are involved in those 'I will give you this job because you are related to me and you are my friend.' It has been perpetuated by White people and created by White people to keep White people in those systems.

Other students were less sure of the impact race had on making connections:

They might not have the opportunities to make those connections that White people are making when it comes to finding jobs and making money.

Another student hypothesized that it is actually class status that is a more critical factor than race in determining whether a person will be able to make the right connections:

If the Black person was poorer, the White person was richer, I don't think the Black person would make any connections. If the Black person was richer and the White person was poorer, I don't think the White person would make the connections.

After making his observation, this student continued to elaborate on the advantages a White person might have. From his perspective, "A White person might have more leeway because I think, because the jobs are more White, I think they might know a couple more people." He then contradicted himself again saying, "but I think for a Black person I just don't feel like there is that much of a difference any more." This student realized he was contradicting himself and ended his statement saying "I am trying not to contradict myself, but." Here again is an example of a student who appears to be trying to reconcile his faith in the meritocratic system with his growing recognition that not all people have equal opportunities in this country.

I found no difference between the ways that students spoke about connections based on their gender. I did however observe that more first and second year students mentioned connections as a factor in achieving success than did third and fourth year students. Slightly more not-engaged students mentioned connections as a factor of success than engaged students. I noticed differences in the ways that engaged and not-

engaged students perceived how Black and White people experience access to good connections in this country. Engaged students stated that Whites had greater access to connections because of a “system” that was “created” and “perpetuated” by White people to keep themselves in positions of power. Not-engaged students, while acknowledging Whites have greater access to important connections, did not explicitly attribute that access to a system created by Whites.

From the interviews, it appears that students believe that a person’s access to specific resources such as money and education impacts their ability to succeed in this society. In addition to access to resources, students felt that factors related to social group memberships influence success.

Thematic Cluster: Social Group Memberships

Many students pointed to the importance of a person’s *race*, *socioeconomic class* and/or *gender* group membership as factors that could impact their ability to be successful. I use the title social group memberships as an umbrella term to include these three specific identities that students felt impacted success. Iris Marion Young (1990) defines a *social group* as “a collective of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices or way of life” (p. 43).

The majority of comments made by students concerning social groups focused on race. This is understandable since I asked specific questions related to race and the achievement of success. I did not raise the issue of gender and it was put forth by only half as many students as race. Many students also spoke of the issue of class status. Because most of the specific comments students made about the impact of class were also coded in other specific areas within the theme of access to resources (access to money,

access to a good education, etc.) the issue of class membership will be treated only briefly here.

Race

Almost three quarters of the students said that a person's racial group membership could be a factor in their ability to achieve success. The students talked about this factor in the following three specific contexts:

- the positive impact racial group membership can have on a White person's ability to be successful;
- the negative impact racial group memberships can have on a Black person's ability to be successful; and,
- the linkages between racial group membership and socioeconomic status.

Every student who suggested race as a factor in success indicated that being White was an advantage in achieving success while being Black was a disadvantage in achieving success. When they spoke about the ways Whites are advantaged, some students gave specific examples of advantages in everyday life, including: getting into better colleges, securing housing, and getting better jobs. Many participants clearly recognize that being White will help them to succeed. For example, one male student said that being White means he does not "get the stigma" that comes with being a person of color. Even the "waspy" sound of his name gives him an advantage in getting a job because "people just look at it and think, 'oh that is an administrators name.'" Another White male said

I think, obviously I'm fairly privileged being a tall, White male, Jew. I very, very rarely encounter any kind of social, or socio-economic problems. Almost everyone that I encounter treats me with respect. And expects things of me.

In terms of his future success he sees this as an advantage because he believes that his race will not serve as a “roadblock” for him but that instead the only roadblocks he will encounter are “just my own beliefs and my own feelings of what I want to do.”

Several students talked about how they thought that the high expectations that society sets for White people helps White people to be successful. One put it in the context of his parents’ success saying,

I think they both sort of expected to, and it kind of was expected of them. And just being, you know, they were both baby boomers. They were both like White middle class baby boomers. It was kind of expected.

Another student attributed part of his father’s success to the fact that he was an “upper middle class White person” which gave him a “leg up” in society allowing him to “do what he wants to do.” Another student said she felt that she was “encouraged to go to college” simply because she was a “White girl” whereas peers who were not White did not get that same encouragement. When students talked about how racial group membership could negatively impact a Black person’s ability to be successful, they made statements such as “You are just trying to live the American dream. You’re working hard but at the same time your race is holding you back.” Several students acknowledged that race could be a general “barrier” in society, limiting Black Americans’ access to “job opportunities” and “places to live.” Such barriers make it “a lot harder for them to go as far or be as successful.”

As mentioned earlier, several students talked about a link between the issues of racial group membership and socioeconomic status. Several students articulated that Blacks have been disadvantaged economically and that this disadvantage has thus contributed to their difficulty in achieving success.

I didn't notice any differences in references to racial group membership based on the student's background characteristics of gender or year in school. I did notice that the same number of engaged and not-engaged students specifically mentioned race as a factor in a person's ability to be successful. Initially I was surprised by this pattern. I had expected that engaged students would mention this factor more often than not-engaged students. I went back and re-read the interviews with engaged students whom I had not coded as listing race as a factor in success. Although all of the engaged students recognized racial discrimination at several points in their interviews, they were, in fact, not more likely than not-engaged students to explicitly list racial group membership as a factor in a person's ability to be successful. As previously mentioned, although not-engaged students could see that there are obstacles based on access to education, money, jobs, and connections for Black people, they *also* believed that hard work and motivation could overcome racial discrimination and lead to success. This is another example of how the not-engaged students did not seem to recognize a contradiction in supporting both types of factors as critical to the achievement of success.

Socioeconomic Class

Many students raised the issue of socioeconomic class as a factor of success. Most of the comments students made were directly related to specific factors that fall under the thematic cluster of access to resources. For example, most of the statements students made about class in general were also coded as comments about "access to money," "access to a good education," "going to college" and "connections." In terms of the reporting of these results, I felt it was more important to organize their comments under

those specific factors. Consequently, what I could write here about how students believe class status impacts one's ability to be successful would be mostly redundant. Therefore, this section does not follow the same format of the other sections. It simply provides a short summary of the main patterns.

Students recognized that a person's membership in a specific class status has an impact on their ability to be successful. Students specified class status as influential in their parents' previous ability and their own future ability to achieve success. They suggested that class status influences a person's access to a quality primary and secondary education, their ability to go to college, and their ability to make connections with the kind of people who can help them acquire opportunities for success. All of these issues were seen by students as important to a person's ability to be successful in our society. As discussed in the section on racial group membership, some students talked about the links between race and class status. In addition, in reference to class, several students said that not only is class a factor, but that class was *more* of a factor than racial group membership in determining a person's ability to be successful.

Gender

Although it was not prompted in the interview, some students brought up the impact gender can have on a person's ability to achieve success. While just over a quarter of the students mentioned gender as a factor, it was the least mentioned of all ten factors. Students did not talk extensively about gender. It came up primarily within the context of being listed as one of several social group memberships that might impact a person's ability to be successful. All students who mentioned it said that they thought that being a

woman in this society could have a negative impact on a person's ability to be successful. Gender was referred to as a "barrier" and sexism as "institutional." They expressed sentiments such as, it is "harder for women to gain the same level as a man," that women are paid less for equal work, and that women are not expected to want to get a higher education or to hold positions of authority. Several talked from personal experience. One male used his mother as an example saying, "You know what my mother makes versus what men in her field make is completely different ...I think that is a big factor in people's success." This student's mother is considered to be very successful within a lucrative and prestigious professional field. However, this student still believes that gender has negatively impacted her at least in terms of monetary rewards.

Although this factor was mentioned the least overall, there were several patterns that appeared based on the student's background characteristics. Interestingly, men were twice as likely to mention gender as a factor in success as women were. Additionally third and fourth year students were much more likely to mention gender than first and second year students. And finally, engaged students were twice as likely to mention gender as not-engaged students.

Conclusion

From the interviews it is apparent that students felt that a person's ability to achieve success is impacted by several important factors. The fact that the most often cited factors spanned across all three thematic clusters is interesting. In general, students stated that there are a combination of factors that influence a person's ability to be successful. For example it was common for a student to say that the factors of *hard work*, *access to a good education*, *parental support*, and *race* all impact a person's ability to

succeed. Overall, the students' background characteristics of gender and year in school did not translate into a great deal of difference in the ways they perceived most of the factors. There were however some interesting differences in the ways that engaged and not-engaged students perceived the different factors.

There was the least agreement between engaged and not-engaged students on the factors related to achievement motivation. Not-engaged students tended to perceive both hard work and self-motivation as factors critical to success and as factors that could help overcome roadblocks brought on by a lack of resources or posed by social group memberships. Engaged students on the other hand, tended to believe that these factors, while helpful to achieving success, must not be seen as an antidote to a lack of resources or roadblocks posed by social group memberships.

In terms of the factors related to resources, the students were very clear that a person's access to specific resources such as money and education has a profound impact on their ability to be successful. Generally, all of the factors related to this theme were discussed in similar numbers by engaged and not-engaged students. As pointed out, however, there were several distinctions between the responses of engaged and not-engaged students. Engaged students were more likely to attribute differences in things such as access to education or connections to a social "system" or "structure" that creates differences in access. Not-engaged students did not generally use terms such as systems or structures to describe differences in access.

There was generally agreement among engaged and not-engaged students about the importance of the factors related to social group memberships. The main difference was in the way that students felt other factors could make up for roadblocks posed by

social group memberships. Again, not-engaged students tended to say that a willingness to work hard or a strong sense of self-motivation could make up for racial discrimination or a lack of economic or educational resources whereas engaged students did not show support for that conclusion.

It is interesting to note that engaged and not-engaged students talked in much more similar ways about factors that fall under the themes of access to resources and social group membership than they did about factors that fall under the theme of achievement motivation. As stated in the introduction of this chapter, it is also important to realize that these themes correspond to different beliefs about the causes of stratification. The themes of access to resources and social group membership fall under a structuralist framework while achievement motivation falls under an individualist framework. Both engaged and not-engaged students provided both structuralist and individualist explanations for the achievement of success. While both groups put forth factors that support both belief systems, it is also clear that generally the engaged students placed more emphasis on a structuralist perspective and the not-engaged students placed more emphasis on an individualist perspective.

It appears then that while many of the not-engaged students could cite specific structural issues related to a person's access to resources or to their social group memberships, they still also relied on notions of individual fortitude and drive to help them explain why one individual is able to achieve success and another is not. The not-engaged students did not seem to recognize a contradiction in supporting both structuralist and individualist factors as equally critical to success. The engaged students on the other hand presumably recognized the contradiction between individualist merit

ideology and structural barriers to success. The engaged students tended to point out that hard work or motivation are not enough to counteract barriers erected by a lack of resources or by discrimination based on social group memberships. It may be that the not-engaged students were relying on faith in the dominant ideology more than the engaged students were to frame their perspectives on the factors that lead to success.

The contradictions expressed by the students and their relationship to the dominant merit ideology will be explored more in-depth in Chapter Seven after results of the other two research questions have been added to the discussion.

CHAPTER 5

EXPLANATIONS OF INEQUALITY

Introduction

The second question of this study asks “How do traditional-aged White college students explain the level of economic inequality that exists between Black and White Americans?” To help students focus on this question I presented them with statistical data addressing current levels of income and poverty among Black and White Americans (*U.S. census bureau*, 2003). These statistics showed that White Americans have higher median incomes and lower rates of poverty than Black Americans. In the United States, the achievement of success is often measured in terms of income (Hochschild, 1995). Therefore, asking students to reflect on and explain the reasons for such economic disparities can help illuminate how White students understand and grapple with issues of racial inequality.

As students described their thoughts on these statistics, three specific themes emerged. I refer to these three themes as “explanations of inequality” because they each serve to explain whom or what the students believe is responsible for the economic inequality between Blacks and Whites. As shown in Table 5, one explanation considers *Black individuals* as the source of the inequality by placing the responsibility on Blacks’ attitudes and behaviors that are seen as counterproductive to achievement. Another puts the blame on *White individuals* who exhibit racist attitudes and behaviors against Blacks. The third cites the *social structures* of current and historical forms of institutionalized racism as responsible for racial inequality. Three quarters of the students cited more than

one of the three themes to help them explain why economic inequality exists. For example, many of the students who said that social structures caused economic inequality also felt that White individuals had a role in creating inequality as well.

Table 5
Explanations of Inequality

THEMATIC CLUSTERS		
Individual Level		Structural Level
Black Individuals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attitudes and behaviors counterproductive to achievement 	White Individuals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attitudes and behaviors that discriminate against Blacks 	Social Structures <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current and historical forms of institutionalized racism

As I found in Chapter Four, the three themes in this chapter can be further clustered according to whether they focus on *individual* or *structural* level phenomena. As their titles indicate, the explanations that focus on Black and White individuals reflect an emphasis on the individual level. They both place the responsibility for racial inequality on the attitudes and behaviors of individual people without linking them to larger social structures or institutions. On the other hand, the explanation of social structures reflects a focus on structural level phenomena because the responsibility for racial inequality is not seen as the result of individual actions or attitudes but as the result of the structural policies and procedures of social institutions. Interestingly, two of these three explanations of inequality also correspond with individualist and structuralist stratification beliefs. First, explaining inequality through the attitudes and behaviors of Blacks, illustrates the individualist stratification perspective. This explanation assumes

that all people have equal opportunity and therefore Blacks could achieve economic equality with Whites if they would demonstrate a comparable level of effort and ability (Kluegel & Bobo, 1993). Second, placing responsibility on social structures typifies a structuralist stratification perspective by rejecting a belief in the fairness of opportunity and pointing to systemic factors that impact economic inequality (Kluegel & Bobo, 1993; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). In contrast, the explanation that places the responsibility for inequality on White attitudes and behaviors highlights individual racial bias – that is, stereotypes, negative affect, and discrimination (Dovidio et al., 2004). The latter does not fit within the conceptual framework of stratification beliefs.

I have chosen to present the three thematic clusters in an order that I see as a continuum in terms of understanding systemic racism – a continuum from the individual level to the structural level. At one end of the continuum is the blaming of the victims of racism for the effects of their oppression (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997; Ryan, 1971). Next is the explanation which focus on the actions or beliefs of individual Whites. This is followed by the more cognitively complex (Bidell et al., 1994) understanding of inequality as structural.

Similar to the format used in Chapter Four, this chapter will provide an overview of students' understanding of each of the three specific explanations for inequality. I will use the students' own words to demonstrate how they describe each of the three explanations. For each, I will also include a discussion of any patterns that emerge based on the students' year in school, gender, or level of engagement with issues of racism. I will conclude the chapter with a summary of the patterns I noticed based on the students' engagement with issues of racism as well as a brief comparison of the students'

perspectives in this chapter with their thoughts about achieving success as presented in Chapter Four.

Thematic Cluster: Individual Level

Attitudes and Behaviors of Black Individuals

Some students believed that Black individuals were responsible for their own lack of achievement and economic success. For example, some students explained the income differences and poverty levels between Blacks and Whites as a result of Black individuals' lack of motivation to work hard or poor decisions such as getting involved in drugs or violence that lead to "wasting opportunities." Some speculated that Blacks' lack of achievement motivation might result from a lack of "good role models" or because they "just don't know better."

It is not at all surprising that some of the students in this study placed a responsibility for racial inequality on Blacks. Many Whites believe that Blacks have failed to take advantage of opportunities created the Civil Rights Movement, and lag behind Whites because of flaws in Black culture (Bobo et al., 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Brown et al., 2003; Feagin, 2001). William Ryan (1971) labels this phenomenon "Blaming the Victim." The notion of blaming the victim is deeply imbedded in a U.S. ideology about the "culture of poverty"³ (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Ryan, 1971). The culture of poverty acquired a central position in popular American thought in the 1960's. It

³ The term "culture of poverty" was originated by Oscar Lewis in his 1966 article by the same name in Scientific American CCXV, No. 16 (October, 1966), pp. 19-25

brought forth a set of stereotypes that support the idea that “Black culture produces a weak and disorganized form of family life, which in turn is a major factor in maintaining Negro inequality” (Ryan, 1971, p. 65). This ideology continues to be prevalent today and is reenacted in dominant media portrayals of Blacks as dangerous, lazy, and living on welfare in single parent families (Feagin et al., 2001).

With the prevalence of these negative Black stereotypes, it is not surprising that some of the students in this study expressed a belief that Blacks themselves are at least partially responsible for the income gap and differences in poverty level that exist between Black and White Americans. Just over a quarter of the students expressed this opinion. As I review the students’ responses, I additionally wonder if my use of a statistic showing that Blacks have a poverty rate almost three times that of Whites may have evoked some of the stereotypical images students used to describe the experiences of Black individuals living in high poverty areas – images that are reinforced by the media.

The students spoke specifically of their perceptions of the attitudes and behaviors of Black Americans within the contexts of:

- a lack of positive role models;
- a failure of Black families to transmit good values and decision making; and,
- a lack of self-motivation to achieve economic success.

A lack of positive role models was cited by some students as a possible barrier to Blacks’ ability to achieve economic equality. Two women who plan to be teachers each said they want to work with “tough kids” in an “urban area” so that they can be “a good role model” for them. They characterized these children as not having anyone to listen to them and as having parents that “never went to college and did good.” One of the two

said this lack of role models leads to a lack of desire to achieve success because, "maybe they just don't know any better and this is their lifestyle and their culture." The opinion that Black children do not have a "good example" to follow was expressed by several other students. The following two quotes exemplify the commonly-held stereotype of Blacks living in crime-ridden urban areas.

You are living in the center of Brooklyn, you know where all the shootings are, like Harlem, right there. You might not of known anything other then drugs, alcohol, shootings, liquor, and if you're good at that, you know if you're head of the crew, you're not going to want to stop because you think that you have reached the highest that you are able to go.

The whole idea that the more drugs you sell, the more guns you have the more times you have been shot, it like builds you up in people minds. I don't understand why that is a good thing at all.

Another student elaborated on what he thought were negative role models by saying that he felt too much emphasis was placed on professional athletes as role models and that he didn't think that other role models such as Jesse Jackson "have the average Black American's interests in mind." He described Jesse Jackson and other "so called voices for Black Americans," as "selfish" and "attention grabbers" who "have devalued what racism is and how important racism is by constantly screaming racism."

This student brought the discussion to the role of Black families by saying that parents were the most important role models for Black children. He thought that the most important thing that Black parents could do for their children was to teach them "good values" in order to "steer them away from drugs and steer them away from all that other nonsense." This student spent a great deal of time discussing the importance of good values. He had more than twice as many things to say related to Blacks' attitudes and

behaviors as any other student and he used the word "values" many times throughout. For example, he said,

So I think just by teaching values, maybe you don't have the opportunities, maybe your chances aren't as good but if you have good values you are setting yourself up somewhat to be successful and each passing generation, you are setting them up to be a hell of a lot more successful I think.

It is important to notice that in the statement above, this student does acknowledge that Black people are faced with fewer opportunities than Whites. At the same time, however, he also warns that the choices that Blacks make are as much to blame for any lack of success as "racism." So while this student recognizes racial barriers he still emphasizes the influence of personal choices and the need for individual effort to overcome those barriers.

You can say racism all you want but at some point you are going to have to look at yourself in the mirror and ask yourself "what decisions have I made that have effected my place, did I do drugs?" If you did drugs, chances are you hurt your chances, did I skip school, well yea, chances are you hurt your chances, and I think part of it can be explained by racism but I think a good amount of it as well can be explained by wasted opportunities.

One of the values this student thinks has a big impact on Blacks' potential to achieve economically is "not running out on a child of yours." This leads him to discuss the problem of "fatherless families" which he says are more common in "minority communities and lower class in general." He believes fatherless families undermine a person's ability to have a support system, a factor he considers critical in achieving success.

A few students spoke directly about self-motivation to explain racial economic inequality. Each said that they felt Blacks were less motivated toward success than Whites.

I would say that maybe the Black males don't try as hard... So maybe they don't have the ambition to go out and get jobs or maybe they can't, I don't know the story... That is the only reason that I would think maybe they don't strive as hard as White people... if you go through like cities, like a lot of Black people are sitting on the street. Maybe they just don't want to go out and get jobs because they don't know any better.

I don't know if Black people have that same drive. If they are told when they are a kid that you are expected to get up there. If there is no example for them to follow. So I think it is partially, if I was Black I would think that I wouldn't have the drive to achieve as much like I would still want to get big but I would say like this is predominately White but like I can try for it but I would think I would fall lower.

Maybe in general, they wouldn't have the desire to go out and make a living that makes a lot of money but then again maybe they don't have the desire to be in those high positions. Maybe they are content with the jobs that they have.

Notice that each of the students quoted above uses the word "maybe" and or the phrase "I don't know" when they discuss the lack of self-motivation among Blacks. Such a tentative response may suggest that these students are unsure if a lack of motivation among Blacks is a primary cause of racial inequality. Beyond these quotes, each of these students also said during their interviews that they were not entirely sure what caused inequality. For example, the last student quoted above went on to say that maybe there were other reasons, perhaps related to family structure, opportunities to go to college, access to specific jobs, etc. that impacted Blacks' ability to be as economically successful as Whites. After he paused for a few minutes to think, he confessed that he was very unsure of why there is a discrepancy between Blacks and Whites in terms of income and poverty level. His *first* reaction supports the dominant meritocratic ideology – that a lack of success is the result of a person's lack of hard work and motivation to be successful. After thinking about it for a while he was able to complicate his response by citing other factors that might also contribute. One reason for this may be that because these "other

factors” reside outside the dominant ideology, they took more time to come to mind. In the end he was not able to come to a definitive answer, choosing instead to say that he really did not know the answer to the question. All three students similarly complicated their answers after initially stating that a lack of motivation on the part of individual Blacks was a major factor in racial inequality.

Perspectives about the attitudes and behaviors of Black individuals did not differ based on the students’ gender or their year in school. There were differences along the lines of engagement with issues of racism. First, many more not-engaged students cited attitudes and behaviors of Black individuals as a cause of racial inequality. Only one engaged student referred to this while five not-engaged student did. Of the five not-engaged students who addressed this issue, one made seven comments about Blacks’ attitudes or behaviors and two others had four comments each. In contrast, the one engaged student who brought it up made just one comment on the subject. It appears that the attitudes and behaviors of individual Blacks is a much more important factor in explaining the economic disparity between Black and White Americans for not-engaged students than it is for engaged students.

Attitudes and Behaviors of White Individuals

In this next explanation of inequality, students place the responsibility for racial inequality on individual Whites who exhibit “racist” attitudes and behaviors against Blacks. I have placed this explanation in the individual level cluster because students pointed to individual actions and attitudes of Whites without specifically connecting those attitudes and actions to a larger social system of discrimination. The students used words such as “prejudice,” “dislike,” “judging people” and “fear” to describe Whites’

attitudes and behaviors toward Blacks. For many of these students, racism results when “people are not educated,” or are “not exposed to different cultures” and “people fear what they don’t really know about.” An important common thread seems to be that “racist people” who “discriminate” against Blacks are standing in the way of Black peoples’ ability to achieve equality with Whites.

It was not surprising that many of the students in this study explained inequality in this way. Most White Americans conceptualize racism primarily as individual attitudes or acts of bias without connection to a broader system of racism (Bidell et al., 1994; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Brown et al., 2003; Goodman, 2001; Tatum, 1992). Because of wide-spread beliefs that the Civil Rights Movement was successful in eliminating racial discrimination (Brown et al., 2003), most Whites have come to the conclusion that racism is no longer institutionalized and if racism exists at all, it is in the actions and minds of bigoted people (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Feagin, 2001; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Consistent with this thinking is a common belief that a reduction of racial prejudice among Whites will be enough to create equal opportunity for Blacks (Kluegel & Smith, 1986).

For many students, the stereotypical attitudes and discriminatory behaviors of individual White Americans were seen as plausible explanations for the inequality between Black and White Americans. The students presented this issue in the following specific ways:

- White people holding negative stereotypes about Blacks; and,
- White employers hiring White over Black job applicants.

Students expressed the belief that Blacks are negatively impacted by many widely-held stereotypes. They believe that specific stereotypes lead to the expectation that Blacks are good athletes, but are also lazy and have criminal tendencies. On the other hand, stereotypes about Whites lead to societal expectations that White people go to college, White people are "more intelligent," and that White people are not criminals. For the students all of this adds up to the expectation that Black people will be less successful in society and that Whites will experience a greater "level of encouragement" to succeed.

Students thought that the prevailing image of Blacks as criminals is the most damaging stereotype that Blacks faced. They mentioned that this stereotype leads White people to suspect Blacks as "more likely to steal" during "everyday things" like "going through a store." In contrast, Whites were thought to generally be exempt from suspicion of being a criminal. Through the following example, one student referred to the "stigma" of expectations of criminality that are placed on Black men that he does not experience as a White man.

The fact that [White people] don't have to worry about being watched when they go in stores and that they are given the benefit of the doubt. If someone accidentally walks out of a store with something and if they get called on it, if they are a racial minority, no way, it's arrest, shoplifting charges and everything. But you know if it was a White person, depending on how they looked. But I mean if it was me, I would be like 'I am sorry, I did not think about it, here.' And it would be all set.

Another student described this same issue saying,

When a White person walks into the store, they could be anything, they could be rich or poor, they could be crazy, they could be normal, they could be violent or passive, they could be female, male, it doesn't matter. But Black people walk in a store, they get watched.

Students felt that the prevalence of negative stereotypes creates a situation in which every Black person is forced to "represent their whole race." They expressed the

belief that Black people always have to be careful about what they say or do because a White person they meet may “instantly associate that with their color.” Stereotypes were seen by some as something that always follow Blacks and against which they continually have to “struggle” to be seen as individuals. One student summed up his perspective on the power that stereotypes have on the lives of Blacks by saying,

I don't think it is the White supremacists style racism that is really hurting minority opportunities anymore. I think it is more just the nagging little subconscious thing in the back of people's minds that are reinforced by the media that really affect and contribute to statistics like that.

In contrast to Blacks being seen as representatives of their race, several students thought that Whites on the other hand are usually seen as independent of their race. Three students said that White people really “don't have to think about race” or what it means to be White in this racially stratified society. One student spoke about Whites' option to ignore race by saying simply, “As a White person I have the privilege not to think about my race. It is a privilege not to think about my privilege.” Another said that she thinks racism “allows for White people to be very blind” about the impact of race on their lives. A third said that White people being seen as the norm in society has been an advantage for her.

The whole idea that I can go through the whole day without thinking about being White, when purchasing something or asking a professor something or talking with a group of friends or driving, or anything. I don't think about I am a White middle class person, it is not this feeling of having to defend oneself I guess.

She gave two examples of this, the first is

If you go into a supermarket or anywhere where there are magazines, there are very often a lot of White people portrayed in the magazines, in the media. But you don't even question that. I don't even see them as being White I see them as just *being* I guess. I think a lot of what being White is, is not really questioning what does it mean to be White.

Then she elaborated on her point by telling the following story,

I was with a friend who was African American as we met my other friend and she acted very differently when she met my other friend for the first time. It was very unnatural, it was not who I know and like but it was like her putting on this image of sorts. I called her out on it after and I was like 'you were kind of acting weird.' She got defensive at first but a lot of it made sense when she was explaining that she acts differently around people with first impressions because she does not want to be known as 'that crazy Black girl.' And for a lot of my friends that are African American, they are the one Black person that people know. They have to represent their whole race and they have to educate other people constantly. And I don't think about that.

Students considered these negative stereotypes and attitudes about Blacks as a basis for discriminatory behavior against Blacks. The example of White people discriminating against Black people within hiring situations was by far the most frequent specific example given to describe how White people with biased attitudes discriminate against Black people. It was cited by almost three quarters of all the students in the study. Many of these White students thought they would be "getting better offers on jobs," and "offered a little bit more money" than their Black peers. They also said that in general when it came to hiring, "White people would be chosen over Black people" and "pushed to a higher position" just because of their race. I was surprised by the large number of students who described this issue in an almost identical manner. Many outlined a scenario in which a White person and a Black person with equal qualifications apply for a job and the White person is hired because he or she is White. This situation was attributed to the fact that there are "a reasonably large number of Whites in this society that still have racist beliefs," who have "that little nagging stereotype" in the back of their mind, or who simply "don't want to have someone of a different race working for them or working at a higher level." One student personalized the issue by stating that if he were in the position

to do the hiring, he would hire a White person over a Black person because he would be "more comfortable" around the White person.

I think that when they go through everything else and it comes down to who am I going to feel more comfortable around. I think that is when [race] might play a role...I think White people get hired more than they would Black people because they just feel more comfortable around them. (4)

He did also say that there were several instances in which he would hire the Black person over the White person. Specifically he said, "if the Black person had way more credentials than the White person I would hire the Black person even if I did not feel comfortable at first," and "I think if you are Black and you did more than the White person, you would get the job," and finally, "If the White person and the Black person had the same credentials I would go with the White person but I also think that if the White person is a crappy person to be around and the Black person wasn't, I think I would hire the Black person."

Another student explained that although she did feel that Black people were discriminated against in the workplace, they could overcome that discrimination if they were to "do very well" as an employee. She also felt that while some companies might not hire a Black person because of their race, the applicant would be able to find a job at another company.

You might not be able to get the job at that company but I think you could find another company who is hiring for the same job and go get the job at the other company. But I think you would have to present yourself at the interview very well too... but I think it is a big enough country. If we were a smaller country it might be harder but I think we are a big enough country that if you can't go through a road block you can go around it.

One student took a different view and said that although he thought there were some cases in which a Black person would not get a job because of "racist beliefs" that in

most cases “market forces” would ensure that the best person for the job would be hired.

He referred to “market forces” several times in his interview.

I am hoping that, when I get out into the business world people are getting ahead because they are good. When companies say that what is important to them is the bottom line, that is the truth...And all people will benefit if that is the case because the markets will drive the economy and will have the best people...When companies are driven by the bottom line and in turn, they don't care what you look like. Or who you are or what your last name is.

I found no differences in the ways that students described discriminatory attitudes and actions of White people based on their year in school or gender. I did, however, find some differences related to their engagement with issues of racism. While about equal numbers of engaged and not-engaged students stated that Whites' stereotypes of Blacks have a negative impact on Blacks, the two groups spoke differently about the impact those stereotypes had on Whites. Specifically engaged students stated that negative stereotypes about Blacks not only hurt Blacks but also benefited Whites. The students said that Whites benefit from higher expectations, from not being suspected as criminals, and from not having to expend the mental energy to think about their race as a factor in their daily lives. Another difference between the two groups was the fact that almost twice as many not-engaged as engaged students said that discrimination in hiring was a cause of racial inequality. When engaged students referred to inequality in employment they tended to speak about it more in terms of institutionalized racist practices. The specific ways that they described institutionalized racism in employment will be discussed in the next section on social structures. Overall it appears that discriminatory attitudes and behaviors of White individuals are seen as important factors in explaining racial inequality by both not-engaged and engaged students, with more weight given to it by not-engaged students.

Thematic Cluster: Structural Level

Social Structures

Discrimination manifested in current and historical institutional settings was cited by some students as an explanation for racial inequality. This explanation is embedded within the institutional structures of society as opposed to being found in the attitudes or behaviors of individuals. Students who rely on this explanation stated that racism should not only be conceptualized as an "individual" bias, referring to "just someone who is a racist who discriminates against somebody either consciously or unconsciously," but also as "institutional." They felt an "institutional analysis" is important because it reveals a "public system" or "structure" that among other things affords White communities better public services including "better schools," "better hospitals," and "better roads." These students said that it is the institutional forms of racism that are the most responsible for "limiting opportunities" for Blacks.

Structural racism can be defined as "the ways in which history, public policies, and institutional practices interact with cultural stereotypes and norms to maintain racial hierarchies and inequitable racial group outcomes" (*Aspen Institute*, 2002). Although structural forms of racism are reinforced by stereotypes they are not dependent on personal attitudes, and often appear neutral in intent (Powell, 2003). It is fairly rare for the general population of White Americans to point to structural forces as the cause of racial inequality (Bidell et al., 1994; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Lopez et al., 1998). One reason for this is that dominant American stratification ideology promotes an individualist explanation for achievement that serves to cover up racial discrimination. It is believed that many Whites develop a colorblind ideology

which helps to justify racial inequality by placing the responsibility for it on individual instead of structural factors (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Feagin et al., 2001).

Almost half of the students in this study recognized some form of structural racism in their explanations of racial inequality. This means that the students in this study showed a greater acknowledgement of structural factors than other researchers have found among their general pool of participants (Bidell et al., 1994; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). The students referred to social structures in several ways:

- They said that most White Americans do not recognize structural racism;
- They gave examples of past institutional racism that have created advantages for Whites today; and,
- They gave specific examples of institutionalized racism within education, employment, the judicial system, the media, and government public assistance programs.

Some students thought that one of the reasons structural racism continues is because most people don't even know it exists. They alleged that although it has a large impact, many people do not recognize institutional racism. This is because of the subtle nature of current-day institutionalized racism and because many people give too much credence to past attempts to create equality. They thought that when institutionalized racism is not seen, many people believe that "everybody has the same opportunities." For example, three students specifically mentioned the danger of thinking that the Civil Rights Movement has successfully eradicated racism in the United States. One said,

Yes it has improved from 300 years ago but, it can be really dangerous to look at the Civil Rights Movement and to look at antiracism work as something that's happened because it hasn't happened, it is happening. And these struggles are still taking place.

Another observed that many people "are content with" the "equality" that resulted from the Civil Rights Movement, particularly "people in positions of power" who "think we have done enough." He disagrees with their assumption and says there is much more to be done. A third student thinks that beliefs about the success of the Civil Rights Movement masks current racism, saying

I think that there is also like a degree of integration which makes people think that like "Oh, because I am doing this, then racism doesn't exist". ...Like "I am in classes with Black students and everybody has the same opportunities" and they ignore the larger racial pressures and I think they ignore the history and the lack of opportunities that still exist.

One student recognized that because institutionalized racism can be hidden, remedies to eradicate racism could miss the mark when they don't focus on changing the structure of the institutions.

Our country has a history of oppressing people institutionally and structurally and we have not dealt with it efficiently. We have created these band-aid solutions of affirmative action or welfare but that is not really challenging the structure. It is not restructuring our institutions.

Several students gave examples of specific historical instances of institutionalized racism that have created opportunities for White people to acquire wealth while limiting Black's ability to do so. Three students specified the institution of slavery as an example. One referred to slavery as a "hold-over" from history that impacts us today and pointed out that "it was 140 years ago that slavery ended which is so short to think really." Two students described the ways that slavery gave Whites an opportunity to acquire wealth,

White people who were here in the United States during slavery were able to accumulate wealth at the same time that the average Black person was a slave and didn't have any of those societal rights at all. If you are looking at inheritance, all of that, all of those factors could be drawn in.

I think the discrepancies between us really do stem back a lot to slavery ... I think a lot of it goes back to like the idea of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps is a lot harder than maintaining what you already had. And so tracing it as far back as the 1860s. Coming out of where you are absolutely destitute, you have nothing, you are a slave, trying to build from that, it is impressive that they have been able to build so much.

In addition to slavery, other specific forms of government-sanctioned programs were described by students. For example, one student made the point that the G.I. Bill played out "differently for White people and people of color" and as a result, White people were able to "afford mortgages on houses in the suburbs in neighborhoods that were restricted from people of color." He believes that this form of past institutionalized racism has benefited White people today because the wealth accumulated from property bought years ago has been passed down to current generations. This student also mentioned the danger of not taking past forms of institutionalized racism into account when looking at current levels of success for Black and White Americans. He thinks that when Whites do not understand history they blame Blacks' lack of success on Blacks themselves and assume that White people have earned what they have simply through their own hard work without governmental assistance.

In addition to historical forms of institutionalized racism, students also gave examples of current-day racism. Employment was seen as an area where institutionalized racism is prevalent. As reported earlier in this chapter, a large number of students spoke about discrimination in hiring. Those comments however focused on the racial bias of individuals responsible for hiring. Students who spoke about employment discrimination as institutionalized on the other hand, pointed to large-scale issues including access to specific types of employment. For example, one student said that to understand this issue you have to "have a conversation on different sectors of employment," and you have to

ask, "who is occupying most of the professional jobs and who is occupying most of the service sector jobs and then, what is the relative pay of those jobs?" Another student elaborated on this point by saying,

Minorities are concentrated in these urban, ghetto areas. From what I understand, where, this is what I mean by the institutional, there aren't good jobs, there aren't enough organizations, there's not enough push in the public schools, or wherever else for these people to go out and get better training, to move somewhere else, to go to college, whatever it is.

Another student said that this limited access to quality employment keeps "a lot of people unemployed" and "creates a vicious cycle where because you don't have a job you have to find some other way of living."

In addition it was thought that "White males have better access to jobs that pay more" and that even when Whites and Blacks are able to achieve the same level of employment that in many cases, "White people are getting paid significantly more for the same work as Black people."

Education was also seen as a central player in institutionalized discrimination. As reported in Chapter Four, this issue was also discussed extensively in relationship to factors important for the achievement of success. Students recognized that there are differing levels of access to a quality education in this country. Students who placed education in the context of institutionalized racism stated that in general, Whites have "access to better schools" and are "involved in more programs outside of school or better day care." Additionally within schools, Black children are more likely to be "tracked" and more likely to be steered toward "vocational schools" whereas Whites are more likely to be found in "honors and AP" classes.

The judicial system was also cited as an institution infused with racism. Specific examples given were "racial profiling" and the "monumental numbers of arrests" of Black men within Black urban communities resulting in "extraordinarily unbalanced prison population." These unequal policies were seen as leading to "the fact that one in four Black men will spend some amount of their life in prison." Students thought this situation "makes things even worse" for Black families.

As previously discussed, some students felt that Blacks were hurt by negative stereotypes held by Whites. The media was seen as a major source of perpetuating those negative Black stereotypes. Magazines, newspapers and television were cited as a source of "images" that depicted Black Americans primarily as "gangsters, punks, rebels." Several students pointed specifically to the number of television shows depicting Black and Hispanic males being arrested. Students thought that Black people are impacted in "very serious ways" by these stereotypes. One student said,

The most Black people you see on television are being arrested on cop shows. What does that say? What does that reinforce in terms of the behaviors that are already associated with the Black community?"

In addition to entertainment shows portraying Blacks as criminals, news programs were also seen to perpetuate these stereotypes,

If a story is a violent crime or something they are identified as an African American man or an African American woman, it is never a White male, or very rarely.

As one student pointed out, "you don't see Ken Lay being chased down by a bunch of police with his shirt off, jumping fences."

Students felt that by focusing on problems in poor Black communities the media skews Whites' perceptions to beliefs that *all* Blacks are involved in drugs and crime and that poor Whites do not experience similar problems.

My younger brothers have grown up and all they see is what is on television because we don't have anyone to talk to in our town, and they think that they are all gangsters and that they are all thugs.

I think if you were to go into White communities of a lower poverty level you would find a lot of similar behaviors as you do in Black communities with substantial poverty level. Which sort of denies the fact that they have a racial implication. Instead they are a class-based behavior and potentially a behavior out of necessity or out of a lack of any number of services you would find in a wealthier community.

Finally, one student cited government assistance policies and programs as an example of institutionalized racism. He said that throughout history these programs have disproportionately helped Whites over people of color – adding that contemporary government assistance has been stigmatized as unfair benefits for Blacks. He said that the G.I. Bill and “the massive public assistance programs that were put into place during the great depression” were not recognized as “public assistance” in the same way that other programs that also benefit Blacks have been.

In today's discourse on welfare you would think that welfare was first of all, the first public assistance program ever to be established and that it didn't help White people and that it doesn't help White people today.

I found no remarkable differences in the way students discussed the influence of social structures in terms of their gender or their year in school. Significantly, however, this issue was mentioned almost exclusively by engaged students. A total of nine students described racism within social structures as an explanation for racial inequality and all but one of those students is engaged. There was only one engaged student who did not explicitly cite examples of structural factors. This student spoke generally about Blacks

having less access to resources such as education and the job market however she did not give clear examples of the specific ways that racism resides in institutional settings.

Conclusion

There was very little difference in the ways that students discussed the causes of inequality related to their gender or their year in school. However, it appears that there were definite patterns in how students conceptualized the causes of racial inequality in relation to their engagement with issues of racism.

Keeping in mind that most students used more than one of the three explanations to help describe the causes of racial inequality, Table 6 shows that with the exception of one, all of the not-engaged students placed primary responsibility for racial inequality on Black and/or Whites individuals. In contrast, engaged students placed responsibility for racial inequality primarily on social structures and secondarily on the actions and attitudes of individual Whites.

Table 6
Summary of Explanations for Inequality

	Individual Level		Structural Level
	Black Individuals	White Individuals	Social Structure
Engaged	X	XXXX XXXX	XXXXX XXXX
Not Engaged	XXXXX	XXXXX XXXXX	X

Both engaged and not-engaged students relied on the explanation of the attitudes and behaviors of White individuals to help them describe the causes of racial inequality. All of the not-engaged students used it as an explanation and almost all of the engaged students did as well. At the same time, engaged and not-engaged students showed almost *opposite* support for the other two explanations. Only one engaged student cited Black individuals as a source of the inequality and only one not-engaged student cited social structures as a source. When we remember that these two explanations are linked to stratification beliefs (Kluegel & Smith, 1986) we can see an interesting connection between stratification beliefs and beliefs about the causes of racial inequality. There appears to be no difference in opinion on the explanation that is *not* linked to stratification beliefs. The explanation that focuses on the attitudes and behaviors of Whites individuals is independent of stratification beliefs and support for it does not seem to be impacted by a students' level of engagement with issues of racism. The other two explanations are linked to stratification beliefs and appear to be adopted very differently by students depending on their engagement with issues of racism. This is a very interesting pattern. Student perspectives on racial inequality are very similar for both engaged and not-engaged students when stratification beliefs are *not* involved and very different when stratification beliefs are involved.

As reported, a similar pattern of connection between students' opinions and stratification beliefs emerged in Chapter Four. In that case the not-engaged students, who tended to place responsibility for racial inequality on the attitudes and behaviors of individual Blacks and Whites, also tended to place greater emphasis on individualist stratification beliefs in relation to the achievement of success: Achievement motivation.

In contrast, the engaged students, who tended to cite social structures as the source of racial inequality placed greater emphasis on structuralist stratification beliefs: Access to resources and social group membership.

I will look more closely at the relationship of these various points of view in Chapter Six. In that chapter I examine the students' understanding of racial inequality and the achievement of success in relationship to their perspectives on meritocracy.

CHAPTER 6

PERSPECTIVES ON MERITOCRACY

Introduction

The third and final research question of this study asks, "How do traditional-aged White college students describe and explain the concept of meritocracy as it relates to the contemporary United States?" This question is an important building block of my study as the purpose of this dissertation is to gain insight into the ways in which White college students understand meritocracy and racial inequality.

As previously noted, a meritocracy can be described as a social system in which rewards and status are distributed on the basis of an individual's own efforts and ability and not according to their racial, gender, religious, class or other group membership (Garcia, 2001; Hochschild, 1995; Lawson & Garrod, 2000; Sears et al., 2000). Because meritocracy is a complex ideological concept, I knew I needed to approach this question in a way that would both define the concept as well as help students examine and then explain their perspective. I decided to present the students with a scenario. A scenario can be a helpful way to present abstract concepts in a concrete fashion (Lopez et al., 1998; Silberman, 1990). This scenario served to introduce the students to two opposing arguments in relationship to which they could situate their own position. As the last question of the interview, I presented the students with the following:

Two students who are friends of yours are having an argument when you arrive. One student says that the United States is a meritocracy which means that if people work hard they will succeed. If they are not successful it is their own fault because they are not willing to work hard enough. Your other friend says that is ridiculous because racism in this country creates a system of advantage for White people so that even if Black people work very hard, it does not mean that they

will succeed. The two of them look at you and ask, "What do you think?" What do you tell them?

Many of the students had quite a bit to say in response. I grouped their responses into three distinct perceptions of meritocracy:

- Those who agreed with the position that the U.S. is a meritocracy;
- those who said that they could see and agree with both arguments for and against the U.S. being a meritocracy; and,
- those who said they were in agreement with the position that the U.S. is *not* a meritocracy.

This chapter will present an overview of the students' perspectives of meritocracy. I will present the students' thoughts using the three groupings listed above. As part of the overview, I will also compare the students' views on meritocracy with what they previously told me about their beliefs concerning the factors of success and explanations for racial inequality. I have chosen to present the three groupings in an order that corresponds to the students' level of understanding of structural racism (Bidell et al., 1994). I found that as students' perspectives move further from the belief that the U.S. is a meritocracy, they also move closer to an understanding of racism as embedded in social structures. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a comparison of how two specific students coordinate their perspectives of meritocracy with their understanding of racial inequality.

"The U.S. is a Meritocracy"

One student out of the twenty agreed with the perspective that the United States is indeed a meritocratic society. This student expressed the opinion that racism should not stop anyone from achieving success. He told a story about his grandfather's achievement

of success to illustrate his belief that the U.S. is a country in which someone can “pull themselves up.” He remembers that his grandfather grew up during the depression and although he did not necessarily have people in his life to show him how to be successful, he worked hard and, “he did it.” This student does recognize that at the historical point in time that his grandfather was able to achieve his success, because of the laws of segregation, a Black person would not have been able to do the same thing. But this student does think that in today’s society the institutionalized barriers of racism are no longer there and anyone can achieve success if they have “decent values,” “work hard” and are a “loyal and honest” person.

When I look at how this student responded to other questions in the interview, I see that his explanations for racial inequality centered on the attitudes and behaviors of individual Blacks and individual Whites. He is a not-engaged student and his assessment of the causes of inequality were similar to those of other not-engaged students. This particular student however placed the greatest emphasis on the attitudes and behaviors of individual Blacks as the cause of racial inequality. He made twice as many comments concerning this explanation as any other student. In terms of the factors of success, this student placed the greatest weight on family support system, going to college, and hard work. He did not mention racial group membership as a factor that either inhibits or supports the achievement of success.

“I Can Agree with Both Sides of the Argument”

In contrast to the one student who saw the U.S. as a meritocracy, seven students felt that both of the people in the scenario had equally valid positions. These students were unable to commit to choosing one side of the argument over the other. They began

their responses with phrases such as "I think they are both the same," "I would be sitting on the fence between them," and "it's not just one case or the other." Generally they stated that "both have a valid point" because "race can slow you down, but so can not working hard."

I mean you gotta work hard to strive to be successful in today's world and there is limitations because there is racism out there.

I am a strong believer in that if you work hard you can do anything but I do think that some people have more to work against. I think a Black person is going to have to work a lot harder than a White person to get just as far. But if they want to get that far I believe they can.

Racism can affect your success, but at the same time, I think there are a bunch of lazy people who could work a lot harder and become successful...if you're a Black person trying to live the American dream, work hard, be successful, so you're working hard, but then your race can hold you back.

While six of these seven students stated that they really could not choose between the two positions, one student leaned more toward meritocracy. She said that although she can see "both sides," she thought the United States was "mostly the meritocracy." This student relates the issue to her own family success story. Her mother who immigrated to the U.S. from Ireland as a teenager is a living example of hard work leading to success.

Just to my experience seeing, my mother came over here 17 years old with like, a dollar in her pocket, and brought herself up, learned everything herself, earned everything she has right now. Even sent some back home. And to see that happen, I think it's possible. And she even came over and she was a little tiny Irish girl and she even got discriminated against as well for being Irish.

Even though this student does have this example she still feels that there are circumstances in society that create a "barrier" for Blacks, making it so that the U.S. might not truly be a meritocracy.

But then, I see that there hasn't been Black presidents, and there hasn't been-- there's been across the board so many powerful White positions and not many Blacks, so I'd say, there is like, that barrier.

After acknowledging that racism creates a barrier, she concludes by saying that out of the two arguments she does agree "mostly" with the meritocracy argument.

Many of these students appeared to have a hard time deciding exactly how they felt about the issue. For example, one student contradicts himself several times in his explanation. At one point he says "I think there is some racial inequality" and states that a person may work very hard but because they don't have access to certain things like "the right connections," the "right schools," or if you are a "Black person and you happen to run into people who don't like Black people," he believes, you might not succeed even though you work really hard. Then later he says, that whoever "works harder" will be successful so he does not think "racial inequality plays a role." In one of his final statements on the subject he says, "if I had a Black friend who was just as smart as me, I would hope he would have just as much chance but I don't know if that is exactly true."

A second student said that in terms of the scenario, he was "agreeing with points of both of them but also disagreeing with points that they both have as well." To support this stance he said, "I mean racism still exists so it is going to play a part in racists' minds." However he then discounts the impact of racism by saying,

I would have to disagree with racism as a factor that would keep someone from being successful. If a Black person works hard and faces racism head-on, if that person has the willingness to succeed I think there are millions of options for that person. Although that person might not see them, but they are there. And if they wanted to they could work around and get over that obstacle. Racism is like anything else, it is humanity and humanity has loopholes and faults. You could find a way around it I am sure. I am sure.

Throughout his interview this student's position on the impact of racism fluctuates several times.

All of the seven students who agreed with both the arguments for and against the U.S. being a meritocracy are not-engaged students. When I look at how these students responded to other questions in the interview I see that they all centered their explanations of inequality on individual level phenomenon citing the attitudes and behaviors of both Black and White individuals as responsible for racial inequality. In terms of their understanding of achieving success they all emphasized achievement motivation factors citing both self-motivation and hard work as important. At the same time however, six of the seven also acknowledged racial group membership as a factor impacting success and all of them mentioned access to some form of material and/or social resources as factors in achieving success. So while the members of this group *focused* on individual level factors they also acknowledge the role of structural factors as well.

Throughout the responses of these seven students we again see examples of students juggling contradictory explanations. Many of the students seem to struggle with how to understand these two issues in relationship with one another. They are unable to deny the existence of either meritocracy or of racial inequality and do not seem be aware that the two concepts could be contradictory to one another. It appears that since the students are unable to reconcile how the two ideas contradict one another, they have resigned to conclude that both are true. As a result they tend to contradict themselves as they try to describe the relationship of the two sides of the argument about meritocracy.

These students seem to be struggling to reconcile the incongruence between their ideology of meritocracy and their awareness of racial discrimination.

“The U.S. is Not a Meritocracy”

A third group of students argued that the United States is not a meritocratic society. A total of twelve of the twenty students expressed this viewpoint. Most were very clear in expressing the opinion that although many people in this country support the claim that it is a meritocracy, that argument “is just wrong.”

What I would love for this country is just a system of merit. You put in the time, you put in the work, you put in the effort, you reap the benefits of that. But I am smarter than that and I know that is not how it works.... there are systems of advantage for White people forever, we have always held the power, we have always been in control.

We may have been founded trying to be a meritocracy...that is what people thought, the American way, the American Dream but history really denies that fact. It is impossible for it to be true.

There's many, many examples that simply having, that working hard, is not what it's always about, and in fact, people who are the most successful are often not at all the most hard-working. And certainly not the most intelligent or skilled.

These students propose that there are systemic forces in place that supersede work ethic. They recognize racism as part of this system and they recognize classism and sexism as part of it as well. They perceive racism, classism, and sexism as interrelated and state that these systems inhibit “equal opportunity” for achievement in the United States.

It isn't just race, I think that class has a lot to do with it. And I think that there are White people who are just as systemically disadvantaged as Blacks so I think poor White typical “rednecks” they have got the same disadvantages as far as making it somewhere money-wise. I do think that race is too simple. I think the idea that if racism weren't there that it would be a meritocracy is definitely not true.

While many of the students recognized the interaction of various forms of oppression as impacting achievement, three students distinguished themselves from the rest by arguing that class inequality was the “main reason” that the U.S. was not a meritocracy. While they agreed that racism is a factor they also thought that classism played the bigger role of the two. Two students expressed that racism and classism are related to each other and that classism does “play off of racism” because “unfortunately in this country, often times, being born a minority is being born poorer,” and in a “capitalist” society it is hard for those who are born poorer “to catch up” with those born into more money.

An additional distinction was raised within this group. Several students further complicated the issue by stated that while they felt that the notion of meritocracy does not apply to the majority of Americans, systems of racism, classism, and sexism create a situation in which meritocracy can be considered relevant for a small group of Americans. For example, two students thought that meritocracy was relevant for specific “White ethnic groups.”

It is very convenient to think that we all can achieve success if we try hard enough because White people probably can... I do think that it is true for some White people...But in general, no.

The student quoted above explains that even among White people, the issue of meritocracy is more fitting for “some White people,” for example those who “go to college.” This student concludes that the U.S. is not a meritocratic system for anyone except Whites who have economic resources “because we are not all starting on an equal playing field” and because of “systems of racism, systems of class oppression, gender, you have to look at everyone’s life in its context.” She went on to remark that it is a

“myth” that the United States is a meritocracy and that this myth has a powerful influence on larger issues,

The myth of meritocracy is part of the way that White people maintain power. The most significant thing here is that privilege obscures privilege. I think that the myth of meritocracy just exemplifies that.

A third student pointed specifically to White males as the group for which the United States may in fact be a meritocracy,

I see it in terms of levels of support. White males I see as being supported and being encouraged to do well throughout their whole lives. Specifically White males, they are the face of success. Who are all the people in power? In entertainment? Anywhere? It is White males. So the American Dream is very much real for them.

While all of these twelve students appear secure in their perspective that the U.S. is not a meritocracy, they also acknowledge that their viewpoint is not that of the majority of Americans. Some talked about why it is that many people really do believe that the U.S. is a meritocracy. They pointed to a socialization process in which the idea of the U.S. as a meritocracy is presented to people their whole lives. They said things like, “you’re brought up to believe it,” “it is something that is kind of ingrained in us,” and “I don’t think anyone is allowed to forget it, you are told to believe it your whole life.” They point to the source of this socialization as parents, literature, television, and school.

I think American history classes are telling us. I think the American Dream is proposed to all of us in any television show we watch or any book we read about the ideals of our country.

Some also talked about how most people really want to believe that the country is fair and that everyone has an equal chance.

You don’t want to believe that things are not fair because that means that you have been treated unfairly or you have been treated overly fair.

I think a lot of people want to believe that people have equal opportunity because like I said before that suggests that America is the land of the free and that goes with our sense of nationalism.

One student talked about how powerful the message of meritocracy is and how people try to *make* it work as an explanation.

If you're brought up to believe in a certain way of things working, then people will go to great lengths to make up potentially absurd hypotheses about why this isn't working for other people.... So it's easier, in a society where your belief system is based on the fact that 'if I work hard I will succeed,' which might be true, for you if you're an upper middle class White boy, instead of trying to broaden your perception of the world. It's easier to just say, to hypothesize, 'oh well, they must not be working hard enough or they must just be lazy' as opposed to considering that maybe the system which they live in is not fair.

He calls this phenomenon a "republican logical fallacy" which he explains as:

The expectation that you can apply your own personal experience to the world. If you are White middle class, you can take things that happened to you and assume that things work exactly the same way for everybody else.

All ten of the engaged students felt this country was not a meritocracy. They were joined in this opinion by two of the not-engaged students. As noted earlier, engaged students placed primary responsibility for racial inequality on social structures. In terms of the factors that impact the achievement of success, engaged students put more emphasis on structuralist stratification factors such as access to resources and social group membership than they did on factors related to achievement motivation. Significantly, the two not-engaged students who also agreed that the U.S. is not a meritocracy were the only ones of that group who did *not* mention self-motivation as an important factor in achieving success. Also one of these two not-engaged students was the only one of her group to give an example of institutionalized racism as an explanation of racial inequality. That perspective made her the only not-engaged student to depict social structures as an explanation of inequality between Black and White Americans.

Conclusion

I found no differences in the ways students perceived the issue of meritocracy based on their gender or their year in school. There are however striking differences in students' perceptions of meritocracy in relation to whether they are engaged or not-engaged with issues of racism. As shown in Table 7, engaged students were much more likely than not-engaged students to say that the United States is *not* a meritocracy. In fact *all* ten engaged students said that the U.S. is not a meritocracy whereas only two not-engaged students said the same. One not-engaged student said that the U.S. is in fact a meritocracy and the remaining seven not-engaged students said they could agree with both arguments for and against the U.S. being a meritocracy.

Table 7
Summary of Perspectives on Meritocracy.

	"The U.S. is a Meritocracy"	"I can agree with both sides of the argument"	"The U.S. is not a Meritocracy"
Engaged			X X X X X X X X X X
Not Engaged	X	X X X X X X X	X X
	<p><i>"Anyone can achieve success if they are a loyal and honest person."</i></p> <p>White male, Junior, not-engaged</p>	<p><i>"I am a strong believer in that if you work hard you can do anything... I think a Black person is going to have to work a lot harder than a White person, but if they want to get that far, I believe they can."</i></p> <p>White female, first year, not-engaged</p>	<p><i>"We may have been founded trying to be a meritocracy... that is what people thought ... the American Dream but history denies that fact. It is impossible for it to be true."</i></p> <p>White female, sophomore, engaged</p>

Interesting patterns appear in terms of the relationship between how the students perceive meritocracy and how they explain racial inequality and the achievement of success. One of the most interesting ways to see this pattern is through the family success stories that several students told. I found that while these family success stories were very similar in content (family members rising from poverty to the middle class), they seemed to be interpreted very differently by the tellers of the story. After looking at the stories in the larger context of the interviews it seems to me that the way the teller interpreted the story is very much related to the way the story-teller defined the factors of success and how they explained the causes of inequality.

For example, two male students, one a junior and the other a senior, had almost the exact same story to tell about their grandfathers. What is fascinating is that the two take completely different lessons from those stories. Both students told stories about their grandfathers who grew up poor but were able to move into the middle class. Specifically, Dan begins,

He was the son of an immigrant who was a fruit vendor in Boston. He grew up in a very poor family. His support was dependent upon his father selling a certain amount of pears per day.

Mark has a similar description of his grandfather's life

My grandfather was born in the 1920's, his father was a laborer but did alright for himself. Then the great depression came and my great grandfather was out of work for five years and my grandfather had to go to work.

Both grandfathers joined the military in World War II and then after the war were able to move into a middle class status. Dan explains,

He ended up joining the military, lying about his age, joining the military when he was 16 and coming back and with the G.I. Bill. Within a couple of years after leaving the military he was able to buy a house.

Mark notes,

He worked at a factory in Springfield, NBC, National Biscuit Company I think it was called. He worked when he was 18 and went into the service because it was WWII and he figured he might get drafted so might as well join. So he went into the service. After that when he came home he worked full time during the day, working full time and going to night school.

I asked Mark if his grandfather was able to take advantage of the G.I. Bill to pay for college. He responded, "I am sure he did, I am not positive of the logistics of it." It appears that Mark's grandfather did go to college after World War II using the G.I. Bill but that was not a part of Mark's original telling of the story.

The fascinating part of these two stories is that the two storytellers see these stories as examples of very different things. When Dan reflects on this grandfather's story he sees an example of institutionalized racism and White privilege.

The way that these benefits played out was differently for White people and for people of color. You had White people suddenly being able to afford mortgages on houses in the suburbs in neighborhoods that were restricted to people of color. ... having that equity, having that house, has trickled down into other generations. So that both of my parents were able to go to college and were sort of raised in this middle class background... that privilege has definitely spilled over from generation to generation.

On the other hand when Mark reflects on his grandfather's story he sees it as an example of meritocracy and the ability of someone to pull themselves up by their bootstraps to achieve success in the face of hardship.

I just think his example makes me expect a lot of anybody... here is a guy who grew up in the depression and he did not have a whole lot of, didn't have examples that would lead him to be what you have defined as successful. And he did it.

These two students reflected on these similar success stories in very different ways. It is important to note that Dan is an engaged student who argued very strongly that the U.S. is not a meritocratic society. In contrast, Mark is a not-engaged student and he

was the only student who agreed with the position stating that the United States is indeed a meritocracy. When we look further into these students' opinions we see that Dan explains racial inequality in terms of social structures citing specific examples of both historical and contemporary institutional discrimination as the causes of inequality between Black and White Americans. Mark, on the other hand, focuses primarily on the attitudes and behaviors of Blacks to explain racial inequality. Likewise, the two differ in the factors they feel are important for achieving success. Dan listed racial group membership, socioeconomic class and the ability to go to college as the three most important factors while Mark listed family support system, hard work, and going to college as the most important factors. One could speculate that the differences in the ways these two students conceptualize the issues of racial inequality and the achievement of success have influenced their perspectives on their grandfathers' story and hence their perspective on meritocracy. When we look at the aggregate of their responses throughout the interview we see distinct patterns emerge: Dan with an overall structural interpretation of achievement and inequality leading to a denial of merit ideology and Mark with an individual interpretation of success and inequality leading to an acceptance of merit ideology.

As I examine other students' perspectives on meritocracy in relationship to their explanations of inequality and success, I see similar patterns. These patterns and their relationship to the literature will be explored in Chapter Seven, the final chapter of this study.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This dissertation seeks to explore the ways that traditionally aged White college students understand meritocracy and racial inequality in the contemporary United States. To this end, I have investigated three specific questions using qualitative research methods. First, I explored how traditional-aged White college students believe people achieve success in current U.S. society. Next, I investigated how those students explain the persistent economic inequality between Black and White Americans. Finally, I explored how the students described the relevance of the concept of meritocracy in modern day America.

In this final chapter I will summarize and discuss my findings as well as implications for classroom teaching and future research. I begin by summarizing and then discussing the major findings of the study. Next, I focus on implications this study has for teaching about racism in the college classroom. I conclude with suggestions for further research.

Summary of the Major Findings

Relevance of Background Characteristics

This study draws from twenty in-depth individual interviews with White traditionally-aged undergraduate college students. I chose to stratify my sample according to the students' gender, year in school, and engagement with issues of racism. I

stratified the sample in this way to see if any patterns in student responses would emerge based on these background characteristics.

After an examination of students' responses in relationship to their background characteristics, I found essentially no difference in the way students responded to my questions based on their gender. This finding is inconsistent with other research that shows White women, more than White men, tend to attribute racial inequality to structural rather than individual factors (Mitchell, 2000) and to believe that people of color "still face substantial barriers and discrimination" (Wise, 1998, p. 11). These results may be due in part to the fact that my sample was stratified by engagement with issues of racism. Half of the men in this study are known to have a commitment to and interest in issues of racial equality. These students are not the norm. The scarcity of White men who are engaged with issues of racism became clear to me as I searched for White male participants for this study. In fact, several of the same five engaged White men included in my sample were recommended to me many times by different people. They seemed to be the only engaged White men that anyone knew! It seems possible that stratifying my sample in order to find engaged White men has skewed the results so that they do not reflect responses that would be found in a general sample of White men and women.

The background characteristic of year in college also did not appear to have an impact on how the twenty White students grappled with issues related to individual achievement of success, racial inequality, and meritocracy in our society. This is also inconsistent with cognitive development literature which suggests that third and fourth year students are likely to have more complex thinking ability and thus potentially a more complex understanding of racism than first and second year students (Bidell et al., 1994;

Goodman, 2001). These results may be due at least in part to the fact that this is not a representative sample of White college students.

Although gender and year in school did not appear to translate into much difference in perspective, there were marked differences in the perspectives expressed by engaged and not-engaged students on all three questions. This finding was somewhat anticipated because previous research has shown that White students who are engaged in curricular and co-curricular diversity opportunities in college tend to show greater growth in complex and social/historical thinking than students who are not similarly engaged (Gurin, 1999). Although a difference was anticipated, the level of differentiation between the two groups was still a bit surprising. A strong discrepancy between the perspectives of the engaged and not-engaged students was found throughout all three questions of this study. The specific differences will be examined within the summary of the major findings related to each of the research questions below.

Factors of Success

If you have the guts to actually work your butt off, you can achieve anything that you want.

White female, senior, not-engaged

If you were to look at the concept of success and say well, you know, everyone achieves what they want to achieve because of their ambition, it completely gives the impression that we all start from the same place and we don't.

White female, junior, engaged

If you're a Black person trying to live the American dream, work hard, be successful, so you're working hard, but then your race can hold you back.

White male, junior, not-engaged

I asked students to describe how they thought that people were able to achieve success in our society. Ten specific "factors of success" emerged from their responses.

These ten factors were further organized into three thematic clusters as overarching organizers: *achievement motivation*, *access to resources*, and *social group memberships*. Achievement motivation was described as related to possession of the specific personal attributes of self-motivation and the willingness to work hard. Access to resources refers to a person's access to economic resources such as money and education or to social resources such as family support and connections with people who can help one gain access to money, jobs, college, etc. Social group membership refers to social categories that people belong to by virtue of their race, socio-economic class or gender.

The factors related to achievement motivation are individual level phenomena because they focus on personal characteristics related to an individuals' desire to succeed. The factors corresponding to access to resources and social group memberships on the other hand are structural level phenomenon, outside of an individuals' direct control. Significantly, the individual and structural level clusters also correspond to the individualist and structuralist stratifications beliefs discussed in the literature review (Hunt, 1996; Kluegel & Bobo, 1993).

Most students thought that a combination of factors contribute to a person's ability to achieve success. For example one individual might say that factors of *hard work*, *access to a good education*, *parental support*, and *race* all impact a person's ability to succeed. Both engaged and not-engaged students referred to both structuralist (access to resources & social group memberships) and individualist (achievement motivation) factors of success. Engaged students however tended to put less emphasis on the individualist factors associated with achievement motivation and more emphasis on structural factors associated with resources and group memberships. Not-engaged

students, on the other hand, felt that individualist factors were just as critical to the achievement of success as structuralist factors.

Achievement Motivation

The individual-level attributes of *hard work* and *self-motivation* were seen by many students as factors contributing to success. Each of these factors was mentioned by almost three quarters of all students. Although both engaged and not-engaged students described achievement motivation as a factor, there appears to be more difference of opinion between the two groups concerning this cluster than any other. Not-engaged students perceived both *hard work* and *self-motivation* as *critical* to success, whereas engaged students warned that while these factors are helpful, they should not be viewed as an antidote to a lack of resources or roadblocks posed by social group memberships. In addition, engaged students tended to discuss these two factors primarily in personal terms, referring to hard work and self-motivation as factors in their own or their parents' success. Not-engaged students on the other hand applied these two factors not only to themselves but to other people as well. Not-engaged students attributed a lack of hard work or self-motivation to the reason why "some people" are more successful than other people and specifically, some of them cited a lack of hard work and self-motivation as explanations for the lack of economic success among Black Americans.

Access to Resources

Having access to a variety of resources, particularly economic resources, was also seen as an important component of success by many students. Every student I interviewed referred to either *access to money*, *going to college*, or *access to a good*

education as a factor in success. Six students mentioned all three. A similar number of engaged and not-engaged students talked about each factor related to having access to resources.

There were however, several differences in the ways the two groups discussed these factors. For example, engaged students tended to place more of a structural emphasis on the link between access to money and access to quality education than not-engaged students did. Additionally, engaged students tended to attribute differences in factors such as *access to education* or *connections* to a social “system” or “structure” that excludes Blacks. Not-engaged students on the other hand, while also saying that Blacks had less access to resources, did not attribute that lack of access to a social system or structure.

Social Group Memberships

The majority of observations made by students related to the impact of social group memberships on an individual’s ability to achieve focused on racial categories. This is understandable since I asked specific questions related to race and the achievement of success. I did not raise the issue of gender and only half as many students mentioned it. Many students also spoke of the issue of class status. Most of the specific comments students made about the impact of class were also coded into other specific factors within the theme of access to resources (access to money, access to a good education, etc.).

I was surprised to find that the same number of engaged and not-engaged students specifically mentioned *race* as a factor in a person’s ability to be successful. I had expected that engaged students would mention this factor more often than not-engaged

students. After going back to the transcripts, I was able to confirm that while all of the engaged students recognized racial discrimination at several points in their interviews, they were, in fact, not more likely than not-engaged students to explicitly list racial group membership as a factor in a person's ability to be successful. I also noticed that although the not-engaged students referenced racial group membership as a factor that could inhibit success, these same students also stated very clearly that anyone could achieve success if they work hard enough. Engaged students did not offer the same perspective.

Summary of Responses from Engaged and Not-engaged Students

While many of the not-engaged students could cite specific structural issues that inhibit a person's ability to be successful (such as having a poor education or experiencing discrimination), many of them relied on notions of individual fortitude and drive to explain why some individuals are able to achieve success and others are not. Many of the not-engaged students seemed to simultaneously hold two conflicting views: one view stating that a lack of resources or membership in a specific social group can hinder a person's ability to achieve success (a structuralist perspective), and the conflicting view that if one works hard and is determined to succeed, it is possible to achieve success no matter who you are and the kind of resources you have access to (an individualist perspective). It appears to me that these students did not notice a contradiction between their two sets of expectations. They seemed to see each as important but also as separate. The engaged students on the other hand seemed to recognize the contradiction between the two sets of explanations. Many of the engaged students said that the factors of hard work and self-motivation could not necessarily be used to overcome a lack of resources or discrimination based on race, class or gender.

Explanations of Inequality

I would say that maybe the Black males don't try as hard. Cause the poverty rate, I mean, that is a lot. So maybe they don't have the ambition to go out and get jobs or maybe they can't, I don't know the story.

White female, junior, not-engaged

There are still people applying for a job and if it is a White person and a Black person, the White person may get it over the Black person.

White female, junior, engaged

Someone might say it is because White people have this culture of education and Protestant values and so White people have these cultural values that would allow for wealth accumulation that Black people don't have. But I don't believe that it is a cultural factor as much as it is societal inequalities. Especially on the institutional level, especially government programs like that with the very history of the economic system of the United States.

White male, senior, engaged

I asked students how they explain the persistent economic discrepancy between Black and White Americans. From their responses, three specific explanations of inequality emerged. Two of those explanations took an individual focus, holding Black individuals or Whites individuals responsible for racial inequality. The third explanation provides a structural focus, citing current and historical forms of institutionalized racism as the cause of racial inequality. Significantly, two of the three explanations also correspond with individualist and structuralist stratification beliefs. Explaining racial inequality as a consequence of specific attitudes and behaviors of Black individuals illustrates the individualist perspective, while placing the responsibility on social structures exemplifies a structuralist perspective (Hunt, 1996; Kluegel & Bobo, 1993). Explaining racial inequality as the consequence of White individuals' racial attitudes and behaviors at the interpersonal level (e.g. hiring) is consistent with some of the social-

psychological theories of racism (McConahay, 1986; Sears, 1988) yet it is not anchored within a stratification beliefs framework.

Most students used more than one of the three explanations to describe the causes of racial inequality. All but one of the not-engaged students placed primary responsibility for racial inequality on Black and/or Whites individuals' attitudes and behaviors. In contrast, engaged students placed responsibility for racial inequality primarily on social structures and secondarily on the actions and attitudes of individual Whites.

Attitudes and Behaviors of Black Individuals

Some students attributed racial inequality specifically to the attitudes and behaviors of Black individuals. Not surprisingly, many of the attributions made by students to explain higher poverty levels of Black Americans in comparison to White Americans reflect pervasive stereotypical beliefs about why Black people who live in disadvantaged urban areas are not able to achieve success. The students referred to a lack of positive role models, a failure of Black families to transmit good values and decision making, and a lack of self-motivation to achieve economic success.

While several students appeared to be very sure that Blacks were to blame for inequality, a few seemed to really grapple with this issue. For example, a few students who immediately placed responsibility for racial inequality on a lack of self-motivation by Black individuals, seemed to then step back from their answers, and add that other factors such as a lack of opportunity for education that might contribute to the situation. They started their explanation with phrases such as "maybe Black Males don't try as hard..." "I don't know if Black people have the same drive..." and "maybe they don't have the desire to be in those high positions..." As they continued to think aloud about

the issue, each of these students then complicated their answers by proposing that there may be additional reasons outside the control of Black individuals that may explain racial inequality. The initial response of these students may be a reflection of their reliance on a pervasive national ideology that focuses on depictions of Blacks as drug addicts, welfare cheats, and petty criminals (Ryan, 1971) as well as a meritocratic ideology that explains inequality in individualistic terms (Kluegel & Bobo, 1993; McNamee & Miller, 2004).

Not-engaged students were much more likely than engaged students to attribute racial inequality specifically to the attitudes and behaviors of Black individuals. Of the five not-engaged students who pointed to the attitudes and behaviors of Black individuals, one made seven comments and two others had four comments each. In contrast, the one engaged student who brought it up made just one comment on the subject. It appears that the attitudes and behaviors of individual Blacks is a much more important factor in explaining the economic disparity between Black and White Americans for not-engaged students than it is for engaged students.

Attitudes and Behaviors of White Individuals

Almost all of the students cited individual Whites who demonstrate discriminatory attitudes and behaviors against Blacks as at least partially responsible for racial inequality. Students expressed that many Whites hold stereotypes about Blacks. These stereotypes lead to the expectation that Blacks are “good athletes,” but are also “lazy,” “uneducated” and “are more likely to steal.” On the other hand, students acknowledged that stereotypes about Whites lead to societal expectations that White people “go to college,” that they are “more intelligent,” and that they are not criminals. Almost equal numbers of engaged and not-engaged students stated that Whites’

stereotypes about Blacks have a negative impact on Blacks. Engaged students, however, also stated that negative stereotypes about Blacks not only hurt Blacks but also benefit Whites. For example, since White people are not stereotyped as criminals, "they don't have to worry about being watched when they go in stores." Instead, they are "given the benefit of the doubt." Additionally since White people are seen as individuals, their individual actions do not "represent their whole race," and, in most cases, they "don't even have to think about race" or what it means to be White in a racially stratified society.

These negative stereotypes and attitudes about Blacks are thought by most of the students to be a basis for discriminatory behavior against Blacks. The example of White people discriminating against Black people within hiring situations was by far the most frequent specific example given to describe how White people with biased attitudes discriminate against Black people. It was cited by almost three quarters of all students. Many students described an almost identical scenario in which a Black person and a White person apply for a job and "the White person is more likely to get the job" simply "because he is White." For many students this was one of the only forms of discrimination put forth as an example. The issue of discrimination in hiring was mentioned by twice as many not-engaged as engaged students. When engaged students referred to inequality in employment they tended to speak about it more in terms of "institutionalized" in social structures. Overall, it appears that the discriminatory attitudes and behaviors of individual Whites are seen by not-engaged students as a more important factor in explaining racial inequality than it is by engaged students.

Social Structures

Discrimination manifested in current and historical institutional settings was cited mainly by engaged students as an explanation for racial inequality. Significantly almost all of the engaged students, but only one not-engaged student, referred to institutionalized forms of racism. The institutions they specifically referenced included education, employment, the judicial system, the media, and government public assistance programs. Fewer students talked specifically about historical examples of institutionalized racism, but those who did so felt that “racial inequality has constructed every institution that exists currently” and that “we are playing out repercussions of a very oppressive history.” These comments were made by engaged students as they provided vivid examples of past institutional racism that has created advantages for Whites, such as “slavery” and the “G.I. Bill.” They also talked of the danger of the popular assumption that past attempts to create equality have ended racism in the United States. These engaged students said that because people believe that “equality resulted from the Civil Rights Movement,” they also believe that “racism doesn’t exist” and that “everybody has the same opportunities.” As a result, they argued, most Whites do not see contemporary forms of discrimination and, therefore, do not work to eliminate it.

Summary of Responses from Engaged and Not-engaged Students

Both engaged and not-engaged students relied on the explanation of the attitudes and behaviors of White individuals to help them describe the causes of racial inequality. All of the not-engaged students used it as an explanation and almost all of the engaged students did as well. Although they had very similar ideas about the role that White individuals play in perpetuating racial inequality, it is fascinating that engaged and not-

engaged students showed almost *opposite* support for the other two explanations. Only one *engaged* student cited the attitudes and behaviors of individual Blacks as a source of the racial inequality and only one *not-engaged* student cited social structures as a source. Significantly, these two explanations are also linked to stratification beliefs (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). As a result, I noticed an interesting connection between stratification beliefs and beliefs about the causes of racial inequality. While there appears to be no difference in perspective on the explanation that is *not* linked to stratification beliefs (White individuals), the other two explanations that *are* linked to stratification beliefs (Black individuals and social structures) appear to be adopted very differently by students depending on whether they are engaged or not-engaged with issues of racism. Student perspectives on racial inequality are very similar for both engaged and not-engaged students when stratification beliefs are *not* involved yet very different when stratification beliefs are involved.

Perspectives on Meritocracy

My mother came over here, 17 years old with like a dollar in her pocket, and brought herself up, learned everything herself, earned everything she has right now.

White female, junior, not-engaged

I am a strong believer in that if you work hard you can do anything but I do think that some people have more to work against. I think a Black person is going to have to work a lot harder than a White person to get just as far. But if they want to get that far I believe they can.

White female, first year student, not-engaged

We may have been founded trying to be a meritocracy... that is what people thought, the American way, the American Dream but history really denies that fact. It is impossible for it to be true.

White female, sophomore, engaged

I described a hypothetical scenario to elicit student perspectives on the issue of meritocracy. Specifically, I asked them if they agreed with a person in the scenario who said the United States is a meritocracy or a person who said that due to a system of advantage for White people, the United States was not a meritocracy. Many of the students had quite a lot to say in response. I grouped their responses into three distinct ways of conceptualizing meritocracy: Those who agreed with the position that the U.S. is a meritocracy; those who said that they could see and agree with both arguments for and against the U.S. being a meritocracy; and, those who said they were in agreement with the position that the U.S. is *not* a meritocracy.

“The U.S. is a Meritocracy”

The student who took the position that the U.S. is a meritocracy spoke of his grandfather as an example of someone who was able to pull himself out of poverty through a great deal of “hard work.” This student does recognize that at the historical point in time that his grandfather was able to achieve success, institutionalized racism would have prohibited a Black person from doing the same thing. But this student does think that in today’s society the barriers of racism are no longer there and anyone can achieve success if they have “decent values,” will “work hard,” and are a “loyal and honest” person.

“I Can Agree with Both Sides of the Argument”

Seven out of the ten not-engaged students felt that both people in the scenario had valid points and they were not able to commit to one argument over the other. These students appeared to find it impossible to decide exactly how they felt about the issue.

Several of the students contradicted themselves as they talked through their arguments. One student said that he was able to “*agree* with both” sides of the argument and to “*disagree* with both” sides of the argument. Another student said that he can see both sides of the argument, and that they “don't cross each other out, but they don't help each other” either. These students generally seemed to say that both arguments were correct because they were unable to see how one could be more right than the other. The exception is one student who felt that although she agreed with both arguments, she concluded, “it is more the meritocracy.” This student said she was influenced by the example of her mother who immigrated to the United States as a teenager “with like a dollar in her pocket,” and was able to “earn everything she has right now.”

“The U.S. is not a Meritocracy”

A total of twelve of the twenty students said that the United States is not a meritocracy. Most were very clear in expressing that although many people in this country believe that achievement is based on “a system of merit” that in fact meritocracy is a “myth.” These students proposed that there are “major social structures in place” that supersede the work ethic. They recognized “systems of racism, systems of class oppression, and gender” as contributors. They thought the three were interrelated and together create a situation in which there is “not equal opportunity” for achievement. Many of these students expressed the opinion that most people do think the U.S. is a meritocracy. They thought that this is because “you are brought up to believe it, “ and “it is something that is kind of ingrained in us.” Several of the students in this group also stated that while they felt that the notion of meritocracy does not apply to the majority of

Americans, that for “some White people” such as “White males” or “White people with a college education,” the United States can function as a meritocracy.

Summary of Responses from Engaged and Not-engaged Students

Engaged students were much more likely than not-engaged students to say that the United States is *not* a meritocracy. In fact all ten engaged students said that the U.S. is not a meritocracy, whereas only two not-engaged students held this view. One not-engaged student said that the U.S. is in fact a meritocracy and the remaining seven not-engaged students said they could agree with both the argument for and the argument against the U.S. as a meritocracy.

Discussion of the Findings

As I review the findings for the three research questions, it seems clear that individual and structural beliefs play a prominent role in the students’ responses to my questions. Therefore, I have chosen to focus my discussion specifically on the issues surrounding individual and structural thinking. This discussion will be organized into the following three sections, (1) the relationship of students’ engagement with issue of racism and structural thinking, (2) recognition or lack of recognition of contradictions in individual and structural arguments, and, (3) the pervasive impact of both merit and racial ideology on students’ ability to articulate structural attributions of inequality. These themes each lead to important implications for both teaching and further research.

Engagement and Structural Thinking

Throughout the three questions addressed by this study, the engaged students demonstrated much greater awareness of structural factors than the not-engaged students.

Engaged students, all of whom said that the U.S. is not a meritocracy, also explained racial inequality primarily in terms of social structures. They cited examples of both historical and contemporary institutional discrimination as the main causes of inequality between Black and White Americans. In contrast, the not-engaged students focused almost exclusively on the current beliefs and actions of individual Blacks and individual Whites to explain racial inequality.

Likewise, the two groups differed in the factors they felt were important for achieving success. While both groups listed factors related to all three thematic clusters (achievement motivation, access to resources and social group memberships), the engaged students placed more emphasis on the structural factors – those related to access to resources and social group membership. When I compare the two group's responses, I am struck by how the not-engaged students favor an *individualist perspective* to explain both the achievement of success and racial inequality. At the same time, engaged students, while also citing some individual factors, tended to favor *structuralist explanations* for the achievement of success and for racial inequality.

These findings are in agreement with other researchers who have observed that those who have had the opportunity to learn about historical and current forms of structural racism in the classroom are more likely to express structural attributions for inequality (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Lopez et al., 1998). While the ability to recognize structural factors of racism is considered to be relatively rare (Lopez et al., 1998), I found that all but one of the engaged students in this study named structural factors as responsible for racial inequality and as important factors in the achievement of success. In fact, the engaged students in this study showed a greater acknowledgement of

structural factors as a cause of racial inequality than other researchers have found among their largely not-engaged undergraduate student participants (Bidell et al., 1994; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). This is not surprising since my sample was stratified in a way that half of the students were thought to have an interest in and commitment to racial equality and therefore are also likely to have a greater awareness of structural racism than the average student.

I also found however that there was a wide range of awareness among engaged students concerning the specific ways that structural factors work in society. While almost all of the engaged students demonstrated at least a basic understanding of the impact of social structures, several students demonstrated a very sophisticated understanding. In support of previous findings (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Lopez et al., 1998), it appears that among the engaged students in this study those who have had greater experience studying issues of racism in the classroom also had a stronger understanding of structural racism. For example, several of the students in the engaged group had been recommended to me as students who were engaged with the topic primarily in terms of their anti-racist student leadership roles on campus. These students had generally taken fewer academic courses focusing on racism than had other engaged students. Although they appeared just as passionate and interested in the topic of racism as the other engaged students, these students did not provide as clear, concrete examples of structural racism as did their peers who had taken more academic courses. In fact, the one engaged student who did not explicitly provide a structural level description to explain racial inequality was involved with issues of racism exclusively through a student organization and did not cite related academic experience. Although this student was very

committed to anti-racism work, she did not have the conceptual framework needed to articulate an argument for structural racism in the way that the students with a stronger social justice academic background did. Additionally, other engaged students who also had limited academic involvement with racism and who said that racism was part of a social system tended to speak in generalities without naming specific examples.

Three engaged students stood out among the others as having a particularly advanced understanding of the structural nature of racism. All three have had extensive classroom experience dealing with racism and other social justice issues and each is in an academic major with a central focus on social justice. Their level of study was evident in their ability to speak directly to the complex nature of racism in the United States. Part of the sophistication of their abilities was related to their recognition of “ideology” as part of the “system” of racism. Each of these three students expressed the opinion that the ideology of meritocracy is employed as a way to “obscure” racial discrimination.

Unfortunately, I did not collect detailed information about the specific levels and types of engagement of each of the engaged students in this study. Therefore, my comments here reflect only general knowledge and observations. Future research should track information about the specific ways that students are engaged with issues of racism (academic classes, student organizations, etc.) to see more clearly how various types of engagement impact students’ structural thinking.

Recognition of Contradictions in Individual and Structural Arguments

While the engaged students were more likely to articulate structural level factors throughout their responses, they did refer to individual factors as well. Many students talked about both structural and individual factors. I found that sometimes when students

used both structural and individual examples to respond to my questions, they contradicted themselves. This was more evident among the not-engaged students. Many of the not-engaged students seemed at times to be involved in a sort of cognitive juggling act, trying to alternately hold on to what they have been taught about a meritocratic society in which race is no longer a barrier to success and also trying to hold on to evidence that tells them that in fact race does present barriers for some people. For most of these students, their solution seemed to be to maintain the validity of both issues. For example, while they conceded that racial barriers exist for Blacks, many also said that *anyone* could achieve success if they are just willing to work harder. It appears that although these students recognize barriers brought on by structural factors such as a lack of quality education or racial discrimination, their recognition of such barriers does not necessarily translate into an understanding of structural racism.

These findings are consistent with previous research which says that the two perspectives of individualism and structuralism are not opposites but are independent of each other, correlated, and can co-exist (Hughes & Tuch, 2000; Kluegel & Bobo, 1993; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Structural beliefs do not necessarily replace individualist explanations. Instead, structural explanations seem to be simply “layered on to” an existing individual base resulting in a sort of “dual-consciousness” caused by subscribing to both a structuralist and individualist perspective simultaneously (Hunt, 1996). Most of my participants demonstrated some level of this dual consciousness by including factors of achievement motivation (hard work and self motivation) in their descriptions of achieving success, even if they also cited structural factors such as access to resources

and social group memberships. This occurred even among the engaged students who were more likely than not-engaged students to describe structural factors.

This “dual-consciousness” or “compartmentalization” (Kluegel & Smith, 1986) appeared particularly evident in relationship to not-engaged students’ perspectives on meritocracy. Seven of the ten not-engaged students said that they could agree with both the arguments for and against the U.S. being seen as a meritocracy. The students made statements such as “I think they are both the same,” “I would be sitting on the fence between them,” and “it's not just one case or the other.” These students are able to see validity in both arguments and do not seem to recognize them as concepts that would contradict one another to the point that they could not concurrently exist in society. In other words, the individualist and structuralist perspectives seem to be perceived as separate and not in conflict with one another. These students were able to accommodate both perspectives simultaneously and seemingly without a great deal of cognitive conflict or dissonance. I sensed that some of the other not-engaged students were grappling a bit more with the two concepts and perhaps beginning to recognize some form of contradiction between the two.

The engaged students on the other hand, expressed much more definite opinions on the issue of meritocracy. Most argued that the U.S. was clearly not a meritocracy and some were even able to say that the myth of meritocracy was used in society to cover-up racial inequality. Presumably, these engaged students have been able to recognize the inconsistency between societies’ pretense of equality and the reality of structural discrimination. Through recognition of these contradictions they have come to the conclusion that the U.S. is in fact not the meritocratic society that it claims to be and they

described the claims of meritocracy as idealized or mythic. It appears that for these students the ideology of individualism has been challenged enough so as to have them reject its' validity as the primary cause of stratification (Kluegel & Smith, 1986).

As Table 8 indicates, students' various levels of recognition of the contradictions can be placed on a continuum. Students at one end of the continuum did not seem to recognize the contradictions at all and could hold both perspectives without conflict. Students further along the continuum began to coordinate the two frameworks and recognize a contradiction but did not know how to work with it so seemed to simply let it sit. For other students, the contradiction was obvious and they could articulate their recognition of it. Finally, at the furthest end of the continuum are a few students who not only articulated the contradiction but also argued that merit ideology is used as a way to cover up inequality and support Whites' position of power.

Table 8
Recognition of Contradictions

No Recognition of Contradictions	Recognition and Articulation Contradictions		
<p><i>"I think they are both the same. I mean you gotta work hard to strive to be successful in today's world and there are limitations because there is racism out there."</i></p> <p>White female, Junior, not-engaged</p>	<p><i>"I think there is some racial inequality, yea...But I think when it comes to meritocracy, whichever one works harder will be hired. ...I am trying not to contradict myself, but."</i></p> <p>White male, first year, Not-engaged</p>	<p><i>"What I would love for this country is just a system of merit... but I am smarter than that and I know that is not how it works."</i></p> <p>White male, junior, engaged</p>	<p><i>"The myth of meritocracy is part of the way White people maintain power."</i></p> <p>White female, junior, engaged</p>

The Role of Ideology

Anti-racism educators must ask why it is that some students are more able to recognize the contradictions than others. Certainly as previous research indicates, participation in academic courses about racism increases students' ability to express structural attributions for inequality (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Lopez et al., 1998). One reason for this may be that anti-racism classes have the potential to challenge dominant American ideology by providing students with information that calls individualist stratification beliefs into question. The findings of this study deserve a discussion of the ways that both merit ideology (individualist stratification beliefs) and racist ideology have potentially impacted the opinions expressed by the students.

Merit Ideology

The power of merit ideology, and its constant recreation, cannot be underestimated in my examination of the perspectives expressed by the students. Reminiscent of Feagin's (2001) concept of *sincere fictions* and as seemingly as habitual as stopping at a red light (Fields, 1990), many of the students used the characteristics of self-motivation and hard work to explain social stratification. For example, on several occasions students responded immediately to my question about the cause of racial inequality with an explanation focused on the personal attributes of Black individuals including what they perceived as a lack of "ambition" or "desire" to "try as hard" as Whites. And then, after pausing to think for a few minutes, they began to complicate their answers by adding other possible explanations such as lack of access to "good jobs" or to a "good education." Eventually, the students concluded that they were not necessarily sure why the discrepancy exists between Blacks and Whites.

This reaction can be seen as one of the ways that meritocracy serves to deny and obscure social inequality. Meritocracy is so ingrained in American imaginations, that its use as an explanation for inequality mirrors explanations that result from what Gurin (1999) calls *automatic* thinking. In the case of several of the students in this study, it was the first thing to come to mind when the students were asked to ponder questions of social stratification. The power of the dominant ideology was particularly apparent in the way not-engaged students held on to a belief in meritocracy even when they presented examples of racial discrimination that create barriers to Blacks' ability to access the American Dream. The socialization of merit ideology and particularly the way it is used to blame Blacks for their own lack of economic success was very evident among some of the students in this study.

Racial Ideology

Another important issue to take into account when examining the perspectives expressed by the student in this study, is the power of *racial ideology*. The racial ideology of *colorblind racism* (Bonilla-Silva, 2001) can be especially helpful to this discussion. A colorblind racial ideology serves to mask structural inequality in U.S. society. A chief principle of colorblind ideology is the belief that the Civil Rights Movement was successful at ending structural discrimination against Blacks and that if racism does exist today, it is in the form of the individual prejudices and practices of a few individual Whites (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Feagin, 2001; Lipsitz, 1998). Most of the not-engaged students in this study clearly conceptualized racism primarily as individual prejudice. As reported earlier, when describing contemporary racism in the United States,

the not-engaged students used words like “prejudice,” “dislike,” “mistreated,” “judging people,” and “fear.” They said that racism results when “people are not educated,” or are “not exposed to different cultures” and that “people fear what they don’t really know about.” Several also said that racist beliefs are passed down from parents to their children. While all of the students appeared to say that racism does still exist, many specifically said that it is much less now than it used to be. Three students said that they thought that there was not much racism in the Northern United States but that it was more common in the South. As for the future of racism, they said things such as “It is bred from a lack of education, and the only way to solve this is to educate and the only way to fight ignorance is to expose different people to it” and “it will still happen as long as those kinds of people are still around.” An important common thread seems to be references to “racist people” as the back-bone of racism.

Racism was not seen by these students as a major obstacle to achievement. It was thought to occur only rarely and to be something that that can be worked around. For example, they said things such as, “I mean racism still exists so it is going to play a part in racists’ minds but I would have to disagree with racism as a factor that would keep someone from being successful” and that if a black person could not get a job at one company because there are racist people there, they could simply “find another company which is hiring for the same job and go get the job at the other company.” For these students, since racism is something that exists in “racists’ minds,” it is something that can be “worked around” because individual racist people can be worked around. According to this view, although racism is a hindrance to individual people of color, it is not significant enough to contradict the overall premise of meritocracy or to threaten a belief

in the dominant ideology. For students with this perspective, the solution to racial discrimination is to reduce racial prejudice among prejudiced people, but not to examine the social structures. As a result, the dominant merit ideology stays intact. Kluegel and Smith (Kluegel & Smith, 1986) refer to the “elasticity” of merit ideology in which specific examples of failure in the system can be seen as exceptions while the overriding meritocratic premise of the availability of opportunity remains intact. In this example, even though students recognize that racial discrimination does exist, because Blacks are seen as a “numerical minority” (p. 28), the system is viewed as working for the majority of people.

An additional tenet of colorblind racism is the belief that current economic inequality between Black and White Americans can also be explained as the result of Blacks’ poor cultural values resulting in violations of the “work ethic” (Feagin et al., 2001). This notion fits right in with individualist stratification beliefs, making it easy to place the responsibility for racial inequality on the attitudes and behaviors of Black individuals. Again we can apply Feagin’s ideas about sincere fictions. In this case, colorblind ideology leads Whites to believe that the United States provides equal opportunity for all racial groups. Therefore, Whites assume that the relative group position of Whites and Blacks is due to Whites’ “virtuous” and Blacks’ “non-virtuous” behaviors (Feagin et al., 2001 p. 204).

There are still many questions to be answered about the specific role that anti-racism education plays in helping White college students recognize and understand merit and racial ideology. There are indications from this study that classroom learning was an important part of what enabled students to have confidence in holding a perspective other

than merit ideology. It also appears that classroom education was important for those students who were able to articulate why merit ideology exists and what it helps to obscure. This brings us to a discussion of the implications that this study has for teaching and for future research about anti-racism education.

Implications for Teaching

The following is a list of specific recommendations for teaching about racism in the college classroom that have grown out of the findings of this study:

- Anti-racism education should include an analysis of the power of ideology. Too often the impact of ideology is overlooked in our conceptions and teaching of systemic racism. Educators need to be aware of both stratification ideology and racial ideology to understanding students' perspectives on racial inequality and racial policies. First, an exploration of dominant stratification ideology (meritocracy) can help students examine their own assumptions about how people achieve success as well as how they themselves explain racial inequality. Students need the chance to examine how the individualistic nature of merit ideology has influenced their own understanding of the issue of stratification in general and racial inequality in particular. Coupled with an introduction to the topic of racial ideology (drawing on the work of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Joe Feagin, and George Lipsitz), students can examine their own "sincere fictions" about race and racism in the United States. Ideally, an exploration of the concept of ideology in the classroom would lead students to a meta-level examination of the ways dominant ideology has shaped their views and those of society at large and to recognition of

the inherent contradictions of putting faith in the principles of meritocracy in a racially stratified society.

- Anti-racism education should rely on socio-historical and structural frameworks to effectively support students' ability to understand the root causes of racial inequality in our society. Since most of our students readily conceptualize racism in terms of individual prejudice, education must focus on both historical and current structural foundations of racism. Students should be presented with a counterideology in which racism is shown for what it is: the combination of a centuries-long system of racist practices found in every institution of society; continuing unequal distribution of resources; and economic, social and political power gained by Whites at the expense of people of color; all disguised by a racial ideology created to preserve White advantages and power.
- Information about the structural nature of racism must be presented in a way that helps students to "examine the roots of their thinking, consider alternative possibilities, and transform their own thinking through generalization and application" (Lopez et al., 1998, p. 325). Keeping in mind that this information contradicts the dominant ideology into which students have been socialized, they need to have the opportunity to examine this new information through a range of methods. Active learning techniques such as discussion, simulations, videos, case studies, group projects, and critical reflection on personal experiences can help student work with the new information.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study has provided important information about the ways that White college students coordinate their understanding of meritocracy with their beliefs about racial inequality. It has also served to raise many more questions about students' learning processes. The following is a list of suggestions for further research that has emerged through the process of this dissertation study.

- There is a tremendous need for future research that focuses specifically on the role of education in students' movement from individual to structural thinking. Most of the studies on individual and structural thinking focus solely on the impact of the number of years of schooling (Kluegel & Smith, 1986) and with the exception of Lopez, Gurin and Nagda (1998), do not tell us the process by which changes in individualistic thinking occurs. While the cognitive development literature can be helpful to us, there is a need for a direct examination of the processes by which White college students who have internalized a meritocratic worldview are eventually able to articulate a structural analysis of racial inequality. Future studies need to investigate the specific sources of information, methods of classroom pedagogy, etc. that impact students' ability to gain and use structural explanations for inequality.
- Research is needed to investigate the best ways to teach about ideology in the classroom. As a complex and essentially *invisible* concept, educators are faced with the challenge of identifying ways of conceptualizing ideology so that students can really "see" it. To truly comprehend the power of ideology students

need to be able to go beyond rote learning. They need to be able to recognize and question the influence of ideology on various aspects of our society. There is important research to be done to explore how educators successfully teach about something that is invisible yet plays such a profound role in shaping social reality.

- Further studies should examine the impact of multiple types of engagement with racism on individual and structural thinking. In this study, I identified students as *engaged* or *not-engaged* with issues of racism. I did not differentiate curricular and co-curricular engagement or investigate how these two types of engagement may have specifically impacted students' understanding of racial inequality and meritocracy. My preliminary findings suggest that students who have taken more academic courses focusing on race and other social justice issues are more able to articulate a structural analysis of racism than students who have been exposed to these only issues outside the classroom. Due to the limitations in my own data gathering, my findings are only speculative. Future research should look specifically at how the different types of engagement with racism (curricular, co-curricular, interactional) impact students' structural thinking.
- Finally, future research is needed to investigate what factors motivate White male college students to become engaged with anti-racism issues and actions. Previous research has suggested that White women, more than White men, tend to exhibit values and beliefs consistent with a concern for racial equality. (Hurtado et al., 2002) Research is needed to support the work of social justice

educators to provide insight and strategies for more effectively reaching out to the White males in their classrooms. In contrast to previous research, I found no differences in this study in the perspective of the men and women. This finding may not be insignificant and needs to be further examined.

Concluding Remarks

There were many memorable moments in the interviews conducted for this study. Some moments stand out because I was impressed by the level of naiveté with which a student spoke and others stand out because I was impressed with the level of sophistication with which a student spoke. Both types of incidents have been very important in the shaping of this study and the enhancement of my ability to teach about racism.

As I reflect on what each of the students said, I think I can say that I have at one time or another expressed every point they've made. The many viewpoints reflected in the interviews appear as a sort of chronicle of my own journey toward trying to understand the complex nature of racism. As stated earlier, I was at one time fully entrenched in a merit ideology that told me that anyone who worked hard could be successful. Like the majority of White Americans, I had conceptualized racism as an issue of individual bias and was sure that if we could just convince people to appreciate everyone regardless of race, racism would disappear. As a result of my own past opinions, at times I felt a sense of kinship with the students who expressed a belief in the dominant ideology. I also have to admit that at times I was in awe of the students who seemed to have such a strong grasp of the nature of structural racism. They are so much further along their journey than I was at their age.

I have learned a great deal from all of the students and this process and I hope that the preceding pages can convey the essence of what I learned. When trying to decide how to conclude my study for the reader I decided I would share one of those moments that stood out in the interviews. This particularly memorable moment sticks with me as a sort of summary of what I would like to accomplish as an educator about racism. One student with a truly advanced understanding of structural racism elaborated on her description of it by saying that racism is based on an “ideology of race” that was “constructed and employed to structure political and economic systems” to the benefit of White Americans. This student then described Toni Morrison’s (1992) analogy of a fishbowl to illustrate her point.

If you are looking at a fishbowl you see the rocks and you see the fish and you see the plant and the water. You notice these things and then suddenly you become aware that they are contained by something that is sort of invisible but it completely structures the life inside. And that is sort of how I view these systems. Those things define that invisible holding container but at the same time that container completely dominates how those lives play out. It exists sort of to obscure itself. Because when you draw attention to it, it is just glaringly obvious what is going on.

From this student’s comments I realized that my fundamental goal in teaching about racism is to help my students to *see* that fishbowl. To sharpen their vision so acutely that they actually see it and see the influence it has on everything within it. Boiled down to its most basic core, racism education should seek to make the impact of dominant ideology “glaringly obvious” to our students.

APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE CONSENT FORM

Dear Student,

This voluntary questionnaire is designed to help identify potential participants for a qualitative research study focusing on the perspectives of 18-22 year old white college students on the topics of individual achievement and social inequality.

Before turning to the questionnaire please first read the items listed below. If you are willing to participate please sign the bottom of this sheet where indicated before returning the completed questionnaire.

Thank you!

Sheri Lyn Schmidt

Doctoral Candidate, Social Justice Education

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

My signature below indicates that I understand the following:

- This is a voluntary questionnaire and I am under no obligation to complete it. If I decline to participate, my standing in this course will not be negatively impacted.
- I have the right to skip any questions that make me feel uncomfortable
- The information I provide will be kept confidential. It will be seen only by the researcher, Sheri Schmidt, and will be used only to identify potential research participants.
- By completing this questionnaire and signing this form, I am in no way obligated to participate in the research project. My signature below simply signifies that Sheri Schmidt may contact me if I am selected as a potential research participant.
- If Sheri contacts me, I am free to decline her offer of participation in the study.

Student's Name

Student's Signature

Date

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: _____

Academic Major: _____

Age: _____

Phone Number: _____

**E-mail
address:** _____

(please print clearly)

1. What is your year in school? (Mark one)

- ☐ First year
- ☐ Sophomore
- ☐ Junior
- ☐ Senior
- ☐ Graduate Student

2. What is your gender? (Mark one)

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male

3. What is your racial classification?

- ☐ White, not of Hispanic decent
- ☐ White, of Hispanic descent

4. On the line below, please specify how you specifically identify yourself racially or ethnically (For example, "White", "Irish American," "Italian American," etc.)

5. Which of the following most accurately describes your citizenship status? (Mark one)

- ☐ At least one of my grandparents, parents and I are U.S. born
- ☐ At least one of my parents and I are U.S. born

- ☐ I am U.S. born, my parents are not
- ☐ I am foreign born – naturalized citizen
- ☐ I am foreign born – resident alien or permanent resident
- ☐ I have a student visa

6. What is the highest level of education completed by each of your parents/guardians?

(Mark one for each column)

	Mother	Father
Don't know	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some high school	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
High school graduate	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some college	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bachelor's degree	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Masters degree	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Doctorate or professional degree (e.g. JD, MD, PhD)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

7. What is your best estimate of your family's total income last year? Consider income from all sources before taxes. (Mark one)

- ☐ Less than \$10,000
- ☐ \$10,000-\$19,999
- ☐ \$20,000-\$29,999
- ☐ \$30,000-\$39,999
- ☐ \$40,000-\$59,999
- ☐ \$60,000-\$99,999
- ☐ \$100,000-\$149,999
- ☐ \$150,000 or more

- 8. Have you taken any academic courses in which at least one-third of the curriculum focused on race, race relations, racism, or racial inequality?** (For example: Soc 106: Race, Gender and Class, Afroam 236: History of the Civil Rights Movement, Econ 144: Economics of Racism)

_____ Yes _____ No

If yes, please list the course titles:

- 9. Do you participate in any curricular or co-curricular programs, clubs or community organizations that focus on race, race relations, racism or racial inequality? This might include; student organizations, peer education opportunities (in or out of the classroom), student or community activist groups, intergroup dialogue, etc.**

_____ Yes _____ No

If yes, please specify

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

I volunteer to participate in this qualitative study and understand that:

- I will participate in an individual interview that will be facilitated by Sheri Schmidt and is being conducted as a research tool for her doctoral dissertation.
- The interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes. The interview will be tape recorded to facilitate analysis of the data.
- The questions I will be answering address my perspective about several aspects of United States society including the achievement of success as well as racial inequality. I understand that the purpose of this study is to learn about undergraduate college students' perspectives on these issues.
- My name will not be associated with the research findings in any way, and only the researcher will know my identity as a participant. Any statements I make in which I am quoted will not be attributed to me personally.
- I may withdraw from part or all of this study at any time. I am free to participate or not to participate without prejudice. Should I decide to withdraw from this study, any data collected will be confidentially recycled.
- I understand that information from this interview and the questionnaire I filled out previously will be included in Sheri Schmidt's doctoral dissertation and may also be used in conference presentations and/or manuscripts prepared by her for professional publications.
- The expected benefit associated with my participation is an opportunity for me to reflect on and express my perspectives and experiences in a supportive environment.
- If I have questions about this study or my involvement in it I can contact Sheri Schmidt at 253-9666 or sschmidt@educ.umass.edu or her advisor Dr. Ximena Zúñiga at 545-0918 or xzuniga@educ.umass.edu
- There is a possibility that Sheri Schmidt may contact me after the interview with a follow up or clarifying question related to my interview.

Please sign your consent with full knowledge of the nature and purpose of the procedures.

A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep.

Thank you for your willingness to participate!

Participants Name

Researcher's Name

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Agenda

- Welcome and thank you for participating
- Overview of procedures, expectations, and confidentiality
 - Review consent form
 - Questions about consent form?
 - Sign consent form?
 - Copy to keep
- Introductory Statements
- Interview Questions
- Wrap-up -- Questions from participant? Thank You!

Introductory Statements

This interview is designed to gather information about your individual perspective and beliefs about several issues in current U.S. society.

Please be honest in your responses, keeping in mind that the “right” answer is what ever you think it is.

I am interested in *your* thoughts about these questions.

Please take time to think about your responses and answer the questions as completely as possible.

I will be happy to repeat and clarify any of the questions as we go along.

There are three sections to the questions:

- First I will ask just a few questions to find out a bit about your background.
- Next I have a set of questions that ask your perspective about how and why people achieve success in the United States.
- Finally I have a set of questions that will ask about your perspective on racial inequality.

Questions:

Achievement of Economic and Social Success in U.S. Society

- Tell me about the place you grew up. What was it like? *Probes – Economic level? Was most everyone like you and your family, or were there differences?*
- Tell me about your major and what you hope to do with your degree after you complete school.
- What is the occupation of your parent(s)? What do they do for a living?
- What factors do you think went into getting them to where they are today in terms of their (1) level of education and (2) their employment situation?
- There are many different ways to define “success.” For the purposes of our conversation, I would like us to define it as “A person achieving the level of education, employment, and income that allows them to live a comfortable, financially stable, life.” What factors do you think will be important in helping you to achieve success in your future?
- What roadblocks if any, do you see that might get in the way of you achieving your goals?
- Why do you think it is that some people are more successful than others are in our society? In other words, how do you explain the different levels of success that people achieve?
- What has led you to your understanding of the factors that go into achieving success? *Probe – What specific (1) experiences or (2) pieces of information have shaped the way you think about this issue?*

Racial inequality in income, education and employment in U.S. Society

- How racially diverse was the place you grew up? *Probes - How racially diverse was your school; neighborhood; group of friends?*
- How do you define the term racism? *Probes – What does it look like? How prevalent is it?*
- In what ways do you think racial inequality impacts the lives of Black Americans today?
- In what ways do you think racial inequality impacts the lives of White Americans today? *Probe – do White people benefit from racism?*

- Show participants statistics that show discrepancies between Black and White Americans in terms of income and poverty (*U.S. census bureau, 2003*).
 - According to U.S. census data from 2001 the median annual income for White Americans was approximately \$31,800 and for Black Americans it was \$21,500.
 - Additionally, for 2001, 7.6% of all White Americans lived below the poverty line while 22% of Black Americans did.
 - Ask: “Why do you think these numbers are the way they are?” In other words, “What are the reasons for the discrepancies in achievement between Black and White Americans?”
- What do you think has led you to your understanding of the reasons for the discrepancies in achievement between Black and White Americans? Probe – What specific experiences and/or information has shaped the way you think about this issue?

The Intersection of Meritocracy and Racial Inequality

- You may have heard that there is a big debate about affirmative action in college admissions. Opinions about the value of affirmative action range on a continuum anywhere from people at one end who strongly disagree with it citing that it is a form of reverse discrimination and should not be used, to people at the other end who strongly agree with it citing that it is an important tool to help level the playing field between racial groups due to racial discrimination. (1) Where do you fall on this continuum (2) what has led you to your opinion?
- *scenario:* Two students who are friends of yours are having an argument when you arrive. One student says that the United States is a meritocracy which means that if people work hard they will succeed. If they are not successful it is their own fault because they are not willing to work hard enough. Your other friend says that is ridiculous because racism in this country creates a system of advantage for White people so that even if Black people work very hard, it does not mean that they will succeed. The two of them look at you and ask you what you think. (1) What do you tell them? Probes -- Which one of them do you think is right? Can they both be right? Is neither of them right; is there another way to look at it? (2) What personal experiences, have led you to this conclusion?

Final Questions

- Any additional thoughts about what we have talked about and how all of this impacts you and your future?
- Do you have any questions for me?

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